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TRAVELLERS

Thirty-One Selected Short Stories

by

L. A. G. STRONG

with a preface by

FRANK SWINNERTON

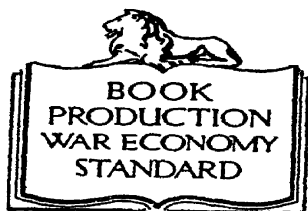


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In
affectionate memory
of
EDWARD J. O'BRIEN

First published in 1945



THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN
COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH THE
AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARDS

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

PREFACE

AS a separate branch of literary art, the short story suffers, not from unimportance, but from a difficulty in classification. It may be a straight narrative, in which chance dominates or illuminates character; it may describe a poignant episode or state of mind; it may tell an anecdote; or it may be a laconic or explosive criticism of human nature; and no summary phrase will embrace 'The Stout Gentleman,' 'Boule de Suif,' 'La Ficelle,' 'My Lord the Elephant,' 'A Tedious Story,' 'The Kiss,' 'The Purple Pileus,' 'The End of the Tether,' 'A Municipal Report,' 'The Monkey's Paw,' 'The Friends,' 'The Alien Corn,' and the hundreds of sensitive impressions produced by living writers of a generation younger than Mr. Maugham. All differ in length and approach.

Yet unless we have decided what a short story ought to be, how can we say whether a short story is a good short story, or otherwise? That, for me, is unanswerable. I do not pretend to have any absolute test beyond that of intrinsic quality. Nevertheless, perhaps we could agree that all the stories I have named have one thing in common; that all are remarkable less for their length than for the singleness and simplicity of their effect upon the reader's imagination? Conrad's 'The End of the Tether,' for example, which is as long as many other works known to us as novels, slowly and overwhelmingly reaches a catastrophe for which we have been prepared by *every* previous detail. In that extraordinarily modern old story, 'The Stout Gentleman,' Washington Irving creates personality solely by means of atmosphere and reference. Chekhov's 'A Tedious Story,' rich as it is in variety, is in fact one brilliant, highly condensed portrait. Do not these and others of the finest short stories known to us fulfil the test implied by Mr. H. E. Bates when he declared of Chekhov and Maupassant that 'they knew to perfection when they had said enough?' Do not all, having achieved the effect which the authors proposed when they began to write them, stop; and, by stopping, markedly heighten our emotional response?

Novelists spread and diversify: it is their privilege to do so. Only the born short story writer 'knows to perfection when he has said enough.' He also knows exactly where he must begin. It is essential knowledge. As Chekhov's character said of something else, 'Besides talent, you must have the knack of it and experience; you must have a clear idea of your own powers . . . and of the subject of your remarks. Moreover, you must be quick in the uptake, keep a sharp eye open, and never for a moment lose your field of vision.' He might have been giving a practical rule to the writer of short stories: he certainly outlines the gifts of the born short story writer.

Mr. Strong, whose stories are offered here in selection, is such a writer. He is master alike of the impression and the anecdote, the cunning narrative, the dramatic and psychological portrait; and readers will find in the following pages examples of almost every type of short story and almost every aspect of his gift. He is always at his best, as admirers of 'The Garden' and 'Sea Wall' will not need to be told, in the evocation of childhood; and it is by happy choice that the collection opens with so typical a piece as 'The English Captain'. The sincerity of this story is perfect. It is in no sense a made 'story'. It is the unblemished re-creation of a small boy's mind and knowledge, and in its own genre is of the highest order.

Elsewhere in the book the made 'story' has its place. To have omitted 'The Absentee' or 'Here's Something You Won't Put in a Book' would have been to deny another aspect of Mr. Strong's talent, his powerful love of drama; and that is why these tales, and 'Don Juan and the Wheelbarrow', which is by way of being a circumstantial anecdote, figure amid such enchanting gravities as 'Death of the Gardener', such subtle and touching studies as that of the young wife in 'The Big Man', and such deeply comic sketches as 'Mr. Kerrigan and the Tinkers'. Finally there is the much longer episode, 'Sun on the Water,' in which an invalid's observation of others who live on or visit an unnamed island overlooking the Atlantic is made to discover for us a dozen or more spiritual contacts. It is the invalid's static position in the foreground that gives this story its coherence; and his

observation is never exceeded. But the taste and adroitness of Mr. Strong's emphasis, the comings and goings of the other persons, the sense of the sunlight, the small rubs and delights of mutual understanding, combine to give drama to the whole.

I have used the word 'drama'; and I should wish to draw especial attention at this point to Mr. Strong's talk. Not only do the characters feel the events which give conflict, whether seen or unseen, to all these stories; they express their thoughts and their feelings with a clearness which shows how unerring is the author's mimicry. Whether he takes us to Devonshire or to Ireland, to a preparatory school or to the Highlands, he is always assured. Coolly, precisely, he allows the persons of the tale to use their natural idioms. Nothing else is needed; and readers who will afterwards examine a story in order to discover why it has so affected them will be astonished to realize how little corroborative detail it contains. In choice of the dramatic moment, in the use of direct speech, and in knowledge of the point at which he has said enough, Mr. Strong is a master; but few who are not professional writers of fiction will truly estimate the virtuosity which enables him to leave so much unsaid.

Finally, this is only a selection from among the author's tales. It is a selection, admittedly, which aims at showing him in variety; but it does not exhaust the whole range of his talent. I miss, for instance, the boxing-story 'Come-back'. And yet if the reader will review the contrasts which are here struck he will see how many of them there are, and how clearly they provide further proof of Mr. Strong's claim to be one of the outstanding short story writers of our day. His interest is insatiable; it expresses itself naturally in a form which calls for economy and self-discipline; and, like those supreme short story writers, Chekhov and Maupassant, he is unrestricted in his zest for and familiarity with the seizable hour in every life, every experience, to whatever class and type such life and experience belong.

FRANK SWINNERTON

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I

THE ENGLISH CAPTAIN

A TESTAMENT

IT is hard to remember that the English Captain belongs to a bare fortnight of my life, and, even then, the remembrance makes a mockery of time itself: for he has spread his roots forward into the present day, and it is hard not to think they must grow backwards, too.

At the time I met him I was one of Father Roche's boys. We were a round dozen, boys on our summer holiday, with a sprinkling of grown men, meeting every morning at the baths to do our daily swim under Father Roche's eye, and to sit talking in the sun against the big white wall that was always, by unspoken law, reserved for us. My ritual was always the same. As soon as I had decently swallowed my breakfast, away off with me, down the little main street of Glasthule (I even forswore walking by the sea wall because it took a couple of minutes longer), off sharp to the right by the metals, and down the winding, clattery steps to the baths. Three minutes, and I'd be in my pelt against the wall, with a towel round my middle, blinking in the hot sun, and waiting for the rest of the gang. It was a point of pride with us younger ones to see who would get best browned with the sun, and I was determined not to miss a minute of it.

By half eleven they would nearly all be there, waiting for Father Roche. You'd hear his voice on the steps before he appeared, and then out he would pop on the concrete terrace, calling back to some one over his shoulder, with a wave of his hand and a smile all across his red face as we shouted welcome to him.

'Good morning, Father.'

'C'm on! You're losing the best of it.'

'Late again, Father. I'll have that bet off you, if you're not careful.'

'Oh, boys, oh, boys, oh, boys. Am I late, am I late?'

Don't say it. Hang on, now. I won't keep yez a mjin'it.'

He would trot along, incongruously black amid all the sunshine and whitewash, like a big plump jackdaw.

'Have ye a box for me, Martin avic? Ye have. That's the boy, that's the boy.'

He would peel the tight black clothes off himself, his fat red face beaming over the half-door of the dressing-box. All the year round, winter and summer, he wore a thick wool vest next to his skin—and very little else, it seemed; for, the moment he started undressing, the vest appeared. I believe he had a stud-hole in the back, and fastened his collar to it. Then the door swung, and out he came, pulling up the strap of his old faded costume, and took his seat in the middle of us.

'Here y'are, Father.'

'No—here.'

'Ah, Father, I've been keeping this place for you half an hour.'

'Ah, Father, sure ye said——'

'Aisy, boys. Aisy does it. There. That's grand.' A funny little sharp nose, he had, tilted up to a point, and the bluest eyes you could imagine; clear, clear blue, like the summer sky, and very bright. Once he was there, we would all talk till close on twelve: warm, happy, sunny talk with a deal of laughter. Then:

'Up, boys. Up we go.'

Limbs would be stretched, yawns made in the face of the sky, towels folded: three or four of us would slip into the boxes, shivering at the cold shade, and come out again buttoning our costumes over our shoulders, running down after the rest to the end of the jetty.

Six hundred yards was our daily swim, from the jetty to the pier and back. Sometimes we would all start together on the outward journey, go-as-you-please for the return. Other times Father Roche sent us off in pairs. Other days, he made a handicap of it, rolling along himself with the weaker brethren, at the slow, easy, porpoise roll of a stroke no one had ever seen him hurry, or tire on. The distance flattered me, and I thought my heart would burst with pride the day

he started me off with O'Killikelly from scratch. O'Killikelly was the Army sprint swimmer, and damned useful; he wanted, this summer, to extend his distance. We swam out amiably together, he going easy to husband himself for the home journey; but the moment we left the pier I let out and drew away from him, finishing thirty yards to the good.

'I couldn't stick your pace,' he gasped, when he came in; and if I ever heard better music than that—— But I mustn't go off yarning on my own this way. He could give me half the bath in a sprint, any day of the week.

I can shut my eyes this minute, and feel myself back against the wall, seeing them all come down. There's not a face I can't remember, but a few stand out. Father Roche towers in front of all, twinkling serenely at me across the years, tipping up his little sharp nose to sniff the breeze and say: 'There's a grand smell of the sea to-day, boys. The sea will be a good place to-day.' And it concerned him, too, for what do you think he did, after we all came back and sat in the sun to dry? About one o'clock, when the rest of us broke up to dress and go home to our lunch, he'd pull on his costume, and off into the water with him again, till half three or four. Two and three and sometimes four hours he'd be in the water, a mile out or more, floating on his back, paddling his feet, and rolling over. Martin Kay told me once, when he was on his uncle's yacht in the Saturday races, they passed Father Roche a mile and a half west of the Forty Foot, and he waved his hand to them.

'Do ye never get cold, Father?'

'Ah, no, me son. The fat on me keeps me warm.'

'What do ye do out there all that time, Father?'

John Clancy could never imagine sitting still and doing nothing for more than half an hour.

'I meditate, me son.'

John wrinkled his forehead.

'I think out the puzzles of me life, son. I think out me sermons. And other things.'

It was a characteristic of Father that he didn't talk easily about God and such matters, the way most priests do. He'd never try to convert you, either. Several of us were Protestant boys, but he treated us no different. Not like Father Jackson,

an English priest that had lodgings in New Town Smith and was brought down by Father Roche one day to the baths. He only stayed a fortnight, thank God. A smarmy, sweet sort of fellow, always making up to us boys. Took me into his lodgings once, and gave me some lemonade and a bit of cake.

'Tell me now, Leonard,' says he, 'What do you think you would like to be in the world?'

('In the world,' mind you; not just: 'What would you like to be?')

I saw him coming, for I was well used to them trying to convert me. So I thought of the most godless trade I was able.

'I'd like to be a comedian on the Tivoli music-hall,' I said.

His face went blank for the flick of your eye; then he smiled and said:

'Oh, you're interested in the stage. Then the dramatic side of our ritual would appeal to you.'

Ah, he was an ass!

But to come back to Father Roche. At half three or four he would come in, rub himself down, have a glass of milk or an egg above in the tea-room, and back into Black-rock with him. A great man, God rest him! I won't be able to give you the measure of his greatness here, for it didn't depend on anything he said, nor on anything he did—at least, not so that you could put it down on paper: he just *was* big. Virtue came out of him. When you were with him, goodness seemed the only natural way of living. Anger and meanness and wrong didn't exist in his aura; it was an effort to remember them. I have only two memories of Thaddeus John Roche and two letters, written after I saw him for the last time; but they'd last more than one lifetime.

He could act quick, too. One day, when he came down, we were all waiting around, and there was no one in but a queer, middle-aged sort of chap, who got into the bath instead of the open sea. We were all laughing and talking, and welcomed Father as usual, paying no heed at all to the solitary fellow in the bath. He was splashing away, and making noises to himself, when all of a sudden Father Roche walked

to the side of the bath and looked in, to see who it was. The next instant he dropped in like a plummet, hat, parcel, and all, and was holding up the struggling fellow—who was quietly drowning there, six feet or less from a score of able-bodied swimmers.

Father's clothes were ruined, of course, and his watch—he was a little worried about that for a minute; he went into the bath-keeper's hut, and the clothes were put to dry on the boilers. The attendant and the rest were hard on the half-drowned man, who was laughing weakly and spitting up water and explaining how he was a good swimmer, and he didn't know what came over him, and so on, to a lot of contemptuous faces that didn't think much of him.

'He has drink taken,' said Billy the attendant, and he went along to tell Father Roche and apologize to him; but Father was sitting, wrapped in half a dozen towels, earnestly discoursing with the bath-keeper on some quite different subject, having completely forgotten what had happened. He could afford to live in the moment, and it's only a great man can do that.

The drowning fellow slunk away presently, without so much as saying a word of thanks, leaving poor Father to the bad, with his clothes spoiled and all. We were terribly indignant about it, but Father never gave it another thought, except, later on, to laugh at us for minding.

I see us all now, as we came there morning after morning, and I feel the grain of the towel under my buttocks, sitting there and resting the backs of my hands on the hot stone. Good Lord, I can't believe I'm here in a chair telling you all this; I'm feeling it, not remembering.

First comes Martin Kay, from school in England, thick set, with curly yellow hair; nice enough, but with the sort of quiet on him fellows get who go to school in England. As if they were thinking all the time, which in most cases I don't believe they are. Then, very beautiful and disdainful-looking, Lance O'Brien. He wasn't disdainful really, and he couldn't help his looks. The disdain was a sort of protection from the way every one wanted to make friends with him. (You should have seen Father Jackson.) Not that they meant any harm, but he was never left in peace, nor treated as an

ordinary boy. No, I've no word to say against Lance. There wasn't much in him, but what there was was decent enough.

Several other boys came, but I didn't notice them much. I can remember their faces, their names, and the sort they were; but they just bob along on the top of memory like corks. They don't matter. I was much more interested in my elders, and preferred their company when I could get it. Soon, about twenty after eleven—sometimes earlier—comes a young, tall figure, walking along with his head a little on one side, or his arm carried stiff, away from him, and snapping his fingers: a handsome, thin face, with a shock of soft black hair that he kept pushing back out of his grey eyes: Desmond O'Mara, who, Father Roche whispered, was the most brilliant scholar he had ever known. More than a student, though. He was laughing in the forefront of every adventure that came within miles of him, and had managed that summer to combine working for a terrible examination with running guns to the mainland at the back of Howth, as a counter to Carson's lads in the North. He won the gold medal in the examination, and was now by way of resting. Every morning he came for a bask and a swim, affectionately answering all the solitudes of Father Roche, who was troubled about him. Desmond had taken a part in one of the plays that were always running in Dublin, where one literary man would write a play and put his enemies in it, and then his enemies would each write a play and put him in it; so that any one who could act, and had a spite against a celebrated person, might find a dozen chances to work it out. Father Roche kept scolding him softly all one morning about taking on this part:

'But ye know, Desmond darling, ye need the rest. Ye should be out fishing in a boat these grand evenings, not stewing away in Dublin——'

'Ah, Father, it's all right. Don't trouble yourself. I'm taking it very easy.'

'He'll kill himself, this boy,' says Father, turning to me. 'He lets his fine gifts burn him up like a candle.'

Desmond smiled at me, the first real notice he'd taken—a one-man-to-another smile. Two or three times he was

charming to me like that, and yet I knew, with some deep down instinct, that he did not really care for anybody. Not for malice, or selfishness, but because his gifts burned greedily ahead into his life and ate it away, so that he could find nothing but an idea here and there to care for, and it never mattered to him what he did next. He was a wonderful talker. I see him now so plainly, sitting against the wall; his thin, white, graceful body, with one hip stuck out argumentatively at an angle, the way you'd think it must be dislocated and would never go in again.

Next, but only two or three mornings in the week, our glory and pride, in his tight silk costume with the green shamrock embroidered on the breast—the international swimmer, Barney M'Gulligan. A sort of hush would fall on the baths as he walked along, a stiff, bouncy, muscled walk from the thigh, as he pitched his straw hat into a box and came grinning up to Father Roche and O'Mara, for whom he had a vast respect. The simplest, kindest, and most unassuming of creatures was Barney. Only when he found by accident what joy it gave would he pitch his hat, when the boxes were full, into one already occupied with some boy's clothes, and ask him if he might share it. Before he learned that, he'd wait his turn like any one else. He had a bullet head, a wide, ugly, lovable grin, and the body of a small Hercules. Small, for he wasn't above five foot nine, but broad on top like a boxer, with thigh muscles that swelled out in front of him: muscles everywhere, thick silk curtain-ropes bunched sweetly under a red, freckled skin. I loved to see him go into the water: a crash, and a welter of foam running away, yards out before you could wink, with glimpses of a thrashing red foot or arm. Like a motor-boat he'd go, for eighty yards perhaps: then turn round on his back and let a great bellow out of him, for delight in the water, his own strength, and the morning sun. At this time he was second only to George Dockrell himself: and any one who followed swimming in Ireland from the year nineteen-o-nine to fourteen will know what that means. Father Roche had paraded me before him, a year earlier, to know where exactly I was losing power on my stroke.

'I can't be sure. I wish I could be sure.' The puzzled

priest stood above me on the jetty, scratching the back of his neck, black against the sun. I dashed the water out of my eyes to look up at him. He turned inland and beckoned.

'Hey, Barney! Barney! Come here a minute.'

I was shocked, scandalized—I could have sunk out of sight; but in two minutes the great good-humoured creature had come down the jetty, diagnosed the fault, and was advising me how to better it—taking as much trouble, for days afterwards, as if I was his own age and a friend of his. He was a Rugby international, too, in the winter-time.

And into this gallery came the English Captain. One or two mornings we had noticed him, a tall, gentle sort of a man, clean shaved, with fair hair and dark eyes, who had very modestly made his way to a place near ours in the sun, and watched us shyly without seeming to do so. Once or twice he hadn't been able to check a smile when O'Mara would be tormenting Barney, or we'd all have a big laugh together. Indeed, there would be many looking curiously at the wise old philosopher sitting against the wall among his pupils. The third morning the stranger was there, Father Roche caught his eye, and the stranger smiled. There was a short pause, then Father Roche crooked his finger and beckoned him over. Barney and O'Mara made room for him at once, for, though he spoke in a very precise sort of a way, very English—we had all remarked him speaking to the attendant—there was something lonely and nice about him. Father Roche asked him questions after a while, and he told us who he was: a Captain in an English regiment spending his holiday here in Dublin for the first time. Father Roche gave a side-glance at O'Mara, for fear one or other of them should express himself about all that was going on in the country, but the Englishman said nothing at all, and O'Mara was too indifferent to make trouble.

The only day their talk crossed on that subject they still kept friendly. I remember that morning well. First of all, there had been some fun with Barney. His silk costume was almost transparent, you see, so he had to wear a triangular slip under it. Sitting against the wall, he wore the slip only. Some one found a big jellyfish beside the jetty, and Barney went a few steps out to investigate, forgetting that he was

visible to all the people sitting in the public rock garden above the baths. He was perfectly decent, mind you, but you know what old people are. There were a lot of nursemaids about, and so several old gentlemen began waving their newspapers at him to get down out of sight. Barney stared at them; then, thinking this was a tribute to his popularity, he grinned and waved back, till the old boys nearly got apoplexy, waving and shouting and hopping up and down in their chairs.

'Barney's been making an exhibition of himself,' says O'Mara to Father Roche, as soon as the priest had settled down amongst us. 'He's been showing the nursemaids his immortal soul.'

'What's that?' says Father. 'What's that, Desmond avore?'

'Oh, shut up, O'Mara.' This, with a great red grin, from Barney.

'He's been standing down there on the jetty in his pelt in front of all the nursemaids, revealing his immortal soul.'

'Now, now, Desmond darling.' The priest's brow furrowed, and he fussed gently, like an old hen among her chicks. 'I can't have any blasphemous talk, you know.'

'That's not blasphemous, Father. It's good sound canon. Don't you remember what St. Thomas says: "*Anima est in toto corpore . . .*" Barney was showing them his *totum corpus*, that's all.'

'Ah, quit coddin'.' Barney grinned round upon us all.

'In any case,' broke in the modulated tones of the English Captain, 'a man's soul is no sight for a nursemaid.'

It was funny, that, though we liked him, it always gave us an uneasy feeling when he joined in a joke. His intention was right, but somehow his touch was all wrong. He could never really be one of us.

'Barney's soul certainly isn't,' said O'Mara, easing the strain.

'Now, now, me children. Now, now.' And Father Roche changed the subject.

I looked away, out to sea. Dublin Bay lay before us, a flawless, dreaming blue. The Hill of Howth curved its slow way along, dim in the haze, like an arm that had started to

embrace the wide bay but was too lazy to go on. In the foreground, the rocks burned clear, with the rich weed bright at their edges. The tide was falling. A gull flew across, close to us, pure and effortless, like a thought. I could see its bill, its eye, and little tucked-in feet. In the strange way a boy's understanding works, I knew that I should one day realize that these were moments in the Golden Age, fragments of the life outside Time, when the human spirit escapes the bondage of earth's dimensions and enjoys every moment at once. We were sitting round Socrates once again, I nearly said: but that would be wrong, because in that life there is no past or future. It was not that we had all once sat with Socrates, and had forgotten it till now; but that we were now sitting with Socrates. Do I make it clear? What is more, it was a flash of knowledge which I was not to realize till some years afterwards in earthly time. When I came back to my surroundings, a late July morning in nineteen-fourteen, that realization lay several years ahead of me.

They were talking now about war. The English Captain, in his gentle voice, was saying that things looked very bad.

'War?' Father Roche sat up and looked around, as if he expected to see it pop up its head out of the water, like a seal. 'I don't envisage war.'

'Not even in Ireland, Father?' put in O'Mara softly.

The priest shook his head in quick reproof, signing him to be quiet.

'I'm afraid it's only too probable.' And the English Captain explained the significance of what had happened at Serajevo, and the alliances in which England was bound.

War—it was a name only to us, less than a shadow. We looked round upon the sleeping scene, the sea drowsing, the big Martello Tower at Sandycove solid and somnolent in the haze. He might as well have told us of the Black Death, or a volcanic eruption from the Hill of Howth.

'I'm sorry to be an alarmist,' persisted the gentle voice. 'But I can't see how it can be avoided. You see, if such-and-such and so-and-so . . .'

O'Mara looked round at him over his shoulder.

'You seem very much concerned,' he said, almost insolently. 'Will it affect you?'

'It will,' replied the Englishman quietly. 'But I wasn't thinking primarily of that.'

'War is a dreadful thing, a terrible thing,' broke in Father Roche. 'Sure any man must be concerned if he thinks such a thing is on the way. But it would be over quick, wouldn't it? Them Germans—sure they wouldn't hold out for long? It's a bluff, mostly, isn't it?'

'I sincerely trust you are right, Father.'

He so obviously didn't think so—he was so obviously being polite—that our hearts closed against him almost contemptuously. These damned polite Englishmen, said our collective thought, they haven't the guts to differ with a man.

'England at war, eh?' O'Mara leaned forward, sliding his hands down his bare shins to his toes. 'More excitement for us, perhaps, Captain?'

The English Captain smiled.

'I doubt if it would be quite such a—such a sporting business this time,' he replied.

O'Mara stood up and stretched himself.

'You don't think we are in earnest over here, then?'

'I don't mean that for a moment,' said the English Captain quickly. 'Please—I had no such idea in my mind.' He was evidently troubled. 'I only meant the affair would not be conducted perhaps in quite the same spirit.'

'We're in earnest, all right.'

He was still smiling, with half-shut eyes, and his voice had the same easy note; but suddenly his figure seemed to stand out preternaturally sharp and clear, and a chill like an east wind blew across us. I thought no more then, but well do I remember the shock with which it all came back to me one morning a couple of years later, when I put down the newspaper on my knees and saw the tall figure standing against another wall.

'We're in earnest, all right.'

For how many, in Easter Week, did thought suddenly harden into action, and an idea for which they would die bring them out, still half incredulous, at dawn, hardly realizing that the fiery world of their dreams had become the cold world of entrapping circumstance; that the flaring martyrdom was upon them in this chill, uncomfortable shape, huddled out of

sleep, yawning and shivering, to the cold wind, the grey wet sky, and the dull volley. . . . I am a quiet man, little given to hate and anger, but may I always have the strength to say my curse on all that sets good men at odds, that wastes the high brilliant life and the gentle understanding life, and spills on the ground the brains that might have lit our world.

The English Captain was an indifferent swimmer, but very anxious to learn. Father Roche and Barney held long consultations on the jetty, while he performed stiffly in the water underneath them; Father Roche bending down, his hands on his knees, and Barney leaning lazily, his great chest rising and falling after the stiff length he had himself just finished. It seemed to me then only natural that every one should wish to learn; and I think still that it was for more than the passport to our fellowship that he tried so hard. He was a man eager to learn anything, and for these few days he was living fully, and holding on tight to life. Strange, that of all our community there were only the three to understand: an old priest who lived so much in the next world that half reality became a phantom, an Englishman with dark, gentle eyes, and a boy too crude as yet, but able one day maybe to read his memories. Strange to think that now perhaps only one brain in the world remembers what those days were: and that brain mine.

Stranger still, perhaps, that from all the three years I had with Father Roche, the key figure, the symbol, you might call him, is that of a man who didn't belong to those years at all, who was amongst us only for a fortnight. It seems ridiculous to say that a man I met like that, and spoke to twice or three times, has been a permanent influence in my life, a character to whom I refer so many of my thoughts and actions, to see what will he say to them. To think that of Father Roche would be only sense: but of a stranger, an Englishman, an outsider to the life I was living with all a boy's one-sided devotion . . . there's little sense in that. Yet I think I can see the reason. I met the English Captain so few times, and his personality, being foreign to our group, so captured my imagination, that I remember every single thing he said, every look, and every gesture: and by continually

looking back upon those memories, which are ready to re-enact themselves at any time, from start to finish, before my eyes, I have come to a very complete understanding of them. I can, as it were, go back across the years and meet the English Captain with my adult self, feeling what he felt, and seeing what he saw.

He was always very nice to me. Like Father Roche, he knew far more about what I was to go through than I knew myself. He addressed himself, not to the boy only, but to the man the boy would become. One morning he was down early, and sat for half an hour, before the others came, talking to me as an equal. Did I think this, or that? How did I feel on such and such a subject? When any one treated me that way, I was always afraid they were laughing at me at first, for all my relations acted very much on the lines that what a boy thought was a sort of disease he'd soon grow out of. But it was not possible to suspect this man. You knew at once that he started from a broad basis of understanding, and was only asking corroboration of details.

So it went on till the morning, soon after the war talk, when I had to go into Dublin to see a crammer in Trinity. I was to have my lunch after I got in. When I was going along to the station, after a glorious swim, a car pulled up in the road ahead of me. I wasn't noticing, and suddenly looked up to see the English Captain. Would I like a lift in?

Would I! I hopped in beside him, and at once began to be shy. I was at a stage when one so often can't open out, can't respond, and, the friendlier the other person becomes, the tighter do the mussel-shells of one's own heart shut, the more unwilling dumb one shows. But the Captain talked steadily, noticing everything along the road, and asking questions, as if he were trying to impress it all deep on his memory. Passing the big red-brick hospital, we saw a poor fellow being carried in on a stretcher.

'I wonder if he's badly hurt,' said the English Captain. 'Did it look serious, do you think?'

I'd seen nothing but a white face and general suggestion of limpness.

'Pretty bad,' I replied.

'Pretty bad. H'm!'

His interest was insatiable. Of course, there's always a good deal to look at if you drive slowly along the back streets.

'Do you like Dublin?'

That I could answer, anyway.

'I love it. You see, we always come over here, to my grandfather's, for our summer holidays.'

'How long have you been a friend of Father Roche?'

'This is the third year now.' I forced myself over a fence of silence. 'He's been wonderful to me.'

'And to me. A splendid man. You're lucky to have known him so long.'

In Leeson Street we saw a young woman stand still on the pavement and slap a man's face three or four times, hard. 'Ah! Don't, now,' he muttered, backing away foolishly; and, seeing that people were gathering, he turned and shambled quickly off. Clear and sharp that scene is, on the far side of the big dark gap, clear and sharp as the candlestick on the table in front of me and the car that's just changed gears outside my window.

The English Captain opened his mouth, as if to speculate on the slap, but I suppose he thought me too young or something.

'Will this do?'

He steered in to the kerb, and I got out.

'Thank you so much for bringing me in,' I blurted.

We shook hands.

'Well,' he said, 'good-bye, and good luck.'

And, as I stared dumbfounded, he waved his hand and drove off. Realizing, I tried to call back 'Good luck' after him, but my throat dried. I just stood gaping as he waved and drove off.

The next morning Father Roche showed us a letter from him.

'MY DEAR FATHER ROCHE' [it said],

'I am so sorry not to have been able to say good-bye to you all. I have received sudden orders to return to my regiment, and so my holiday is at an end.

'There is no way for me to thank you for your kindness to me, and the generous welcome you gave a stranger. I shall

often think of you all. Looking at my watch, I will wonder who has come down first, how long you will sit talking, what you will talk about, and who will win the handicap this time. Please give M'Gulligan my best wishes for the 10th' [the day he had a big race], 'and say good-bye from me to every one in turn. With every good wish to yourself, and all my thanks once more, believe me always,

'Yours very sincerely,

"THE ENGLISH CAPTAIN."

He put his real name after in a bracket; but the point was, he'd heard us speaking of him that way, and had adopted the name, to show he didn't mind.

'He knew yesterday, if you ask me,' said Father Roche, looking up. 'Only he couldn't face bidding us all good-bye.'

'Ah, that was a decent fellow,' said O'Mara, flicking a tiny pebble with his fingernail, and watching it hop off into the water. 'If they were all like him, now!'

(I wonder if there is a wall in Elysium, where we'll all assemble again one day. Desmond and the English Captain are there first, and others join them, till presently there goes up a cheer, and Father Roche waddles down, blinking and smiling.

'Late again, Father,' they cry, very tenderly, to make him feel at home.

I'll be one of the last; still, time won't matter there.)

So passed the English Captain out of my life, and out of my knowledge, for I never heard of him again. But I know quite well what happened to him. Like O'Mara, he was a blood-offering for the life of a world which at that time had no place for him. He died to make life possible for men who were to come after him: for me, among others. We enjoy the good and the rare and the quiet and the beautiful and the courtly things he had to forsake: and it was because his time among us all at the baths was his last holiday that I reproach myself so bitterly for all I failed to do. I know he took away with him a wonderfully bright memory, so can only hope I did nothing to tarnish even a corner of it.

When I go back now and live those days intensely again,

do we meet, English Captain? Can you feel the awkward mind you called upon so long ago? I must believe it, for you so clearly knew. All that really can oppress me is the blessing I did not return you, that last blessing you needed so much more than I. We were comrades, separated in earthly time: you, and I, and O'Mara, and Father Roche. But O'Mara was careless; Father Roche above care; and I was too young. You were left alone. You only could unify all that life into a single experience, a fragment of the age of gold.

So you will have forgiven the boy his failure, or perhaps he will expiate it now, as he struggles to bear witness to you from across the dark gap where life fell into a pit from which it has since been trying to climb out; bearing witness, clumsily, as in life he dealt clumsily with you, but from his whole self: the self which, makeshift though it is, you foresaw, and helped to shape.

II

STORM

SCOWLING blackly, muttering to himself, he strode along the rough lane which led to the open moor. As soon as he could he left it, taking the shortest way up a steep slope dotted with squat furze bushes. He climbed powerfully, forcing his way upwards with savage thrusts of his thighs, plunging his feet down into the soft turf with all the strength of rage that was in him; bending forward to get the fullest measure of his power, heedless of the sultry sky and the sweat leaping out on him at every step.

In a couple of minutes he had reached the top, and, relieved from the pressure of the slope, swung along like a cloud. A little breeze sprang up and touched his forehead, and even in his black mood he half consciously acknowledged its caress. Yet there was that in him which was intolerant of ease or relief, and made him press on fiercely with great

tearing strides. The main road lay two hundred yards ahead. His legs ate up the distance as though by very will-power he could reach out and clutch it towards him. Soon his hobnailed boots rang out in three sudden steps upon the road, and with a run and jump were hushed upon the turf beyond.

Two old men were mending the road a little farther down. The voice of one came up clearly on the oppressed air.

'Stoorm be comin' up, I reckon, Joe,' it quavered. Deeper, less clear, another answered it:

'Aye . . . bit thundersome, like . . .'

But the walker scarcely heeded them, or the coming storm they spoke of. Though the sun was shining sickly and uneasily, as if it had done something it was ashamed of, and though sullen clouds, with edges delicate as the fronds of maidenhair, were gathering over the valley from opposite quarters of the sky, and the birds twittered forlornly or with shrill alarm, he strode on in his shirt-sleeves deeper and deeper into the moor.

Why should one yearn all earth and heaven towards a woman when she was near-by, and lose her clean out of mind when she was away? Why the hell? Nay, still more, why should a woman be different in the very soul of her, when she was gone, from when she was to hand? That was the biggest question of all. When she was to hand, placid, yes, easy, yes, ready to please, yes, never a one to assert herself—she was all that: damn it, she didn't complain of anything, she seemed happy enough, you wouldn't think she had a complaint in her. Yet, no sooner would he be gone, and the urgency of her out of his mind for the time—and that was a good job, for no man could live long at that pitch—than there would come a letter, full of God-knows-how-many whinings and complaints. Why had he said this and that (which he never remembered saying); why had he done this and the other (which he never minded doing); and why had he left this undone, or put such-and-such a slight upon her, and criticized her shortcomings (when no such things had been in his mind at all)? When a man was with her, she was all smiles and yielding. Once he was gone, there wasn't a thing of all the

things he had done or not done that she couldn't turn into a reproach against him.

Not a good angry complaint, mind ye—he stumbled over a stone, and swore—but a little whining soft complaint. I know I am not good enough for you, and I'm willing to be the dirt beneath your feet, but you needn't be mocking at me and turning my humble love to scorn. The hell!

Bile rose in his throat, bitter under the tongue, and he ground his teeth and swallowed grimly. Too damned placid, that's what she was. Why couldn't she have a respect for herself, and stand up to a man? But she couldn't, not in flesh nor on paper. Only nag, nag, nag, complain, complain, complain; and she hadn't even the courage to do that to a chap's face. No: nothing to his face. Once, when his feelings had been too strong for him, and he had gone a bit far—torn her bodice a bit—she had placidly pinned it up and sat looking at him with that silly smile of hers. Damn it, if she'd up and spoke her mind, fetched him one over the mouth, perhaps—why, then a man could shout, a man could laugh, take the adorable little vixen in his arms and crush and kiss her into submission. A clean fight, if fight must be, and a fiery passion to match his own—that was the woman for him. He wanted a telling off, now and then: he'd take managing from a woman that knew her mind and spoke it; but what use was violence and passion against a mere unresisting sheep of a woman who never struggled nor put up fight at all? No, nothing at the time, but all of it weakly afterwards in a letter. 'I suppose it is only natural you can't respect me and treat me respectful as a girl should be treated, I'm so much below you. Give in to you too much, I have, and that is my reward, that you treat me like a low woman off the streets.' What did she know about women off the streets? It would serve her right if— Words and talk, that was all, names and words and talk.

Just such another letter in his hand now. He straightened out the crumpled paper as he walked. The sweat from his palm had blurred some of the ink. No matter—a chap didn't want to read all that wit-pot again. All of it the same; complaining of this, that, and the other; but she'd done it once too often this time. By God, she had. Other times, he hadn't

seen her within a day or so of a letter, and, when they'd met, his anger had cooled and her attraction for him had killed what was left of it. The moment he saw her it all melted, giving place to another fire her nearness never failed to kindle. And he resented this fire, hated and fought against his passion for her, since he did not need his mother to tell him, again and again, that Daisy was not suited to him, and that there could be no peace in such a love. Yet Daisy loved him, and—when his arms were round her—he loved Daisy. Each time he saw her his doubts were stilled, only to quicken like a litter of snakes, once the turn of the land had hidden her from his sight.

But not this time. This time was different. This was to be the last of all. Her letter had come, when by a good chance there was nothing to do at the shed till a load of timber should come in after midday; and he had started off at once in the first heat of his anger to see her and be done with it. Thus he plunged along, the sweat running down his loins, under a sky that matched his mood. Nay, everything around him seemed to confirm his anger. Even as he tore along he found time for a little surprise at himself, admiration for the persistence of his own wrath, which was generally a quick fire, blazing up and soon dead, like a gorse bush in March. But now the arid, lowering sky seemed to beat his own flames back upon himself; flame engendering flame.

A car stuttered along the road, which was now a good two miles behind him; it hooted sharply, perhaps at a pony straying in its path, and he heard with surprising clearness the noise it made changing gears on Merivale Hill. Roused slightly to his surroundings, he looked around. The sun was almost hidden, the sky was pale and leathery, and the black clouds towered above the valley. Well—let it rain. So much the better.

Over the next rise, and he would be in sight of the house. Not long now. Grimly he set his thighs to this last effort, and grimly they answered. One minute now. His head swung over the skyline. There—there she was—the fool—of all things—hanging out clothes to dry. With a thunderstorm just coming on. The crack-brained fool.

When would she see him? He raced noiselessly over the

space between, to get as near as might be to her before she saw. Hanging out washing to-day; my God, what a fool.

She was hidden behind a sheet. There was difficulty with it: it wouldn't stay up. Placidly she contended with it, and conquered it.

Near the gate now. Damn it, too late. She had looked up and seen him.

For an instant she stared, unable to believe her eyes. Then she ran joyfully to meet him.

'Dave!' she cried. 'My Davey! What brings 'ee here this time o' day? Come in, come in! I be that glad to see 'ee.'

For a moment, at the sight of her, he felt himself grow weak, his loins relax, everything fade but the old craving to take her in his arms. Then he felt his very urge blacken and curdle and go sour within him. The innocence of her welcome, as though she had written no letter to him, her obtuseness to what had so sorely angered him, brought back his sullen fury tenfold. He stood stowling on her.

'This here is what brings me.'

He held out the crumpled letter, but, in the shock of her first surprise, she did not notice, talking on happily to him, waiting for no answers to her questions.

'Come in, come in, sit down, and take a glass of cider to cool 'ee after such a long walk in this heat. Come in, come in. . . .'

'This here is what brings me!' He cut her short, speaking the words harshly and loudly, holding out the letter in her face.

She looked at it, not yet aware of his anger.

'Oh aye, my letter, but never mind that now, 'tis so nice to have 'ee here, so unexpected and all.'

Was the maid mad? Had she no sort of sense?

'I repeat, this here is what brings me.' He swallowed hard, and glared at her, with an awkward tightness at the corners of his jaw. 'In this here letter you lay several complaints to me about my conduc'. You charge this against me, and that against me, saying I've served you inconsiderate and failed in respect to you, and such-like.'

He stopped, and swallowed again, while she stared in surprise at him.

'Every time after I've been with you, or 'most every time,' he continued, his voice now deliberate and controlled, 'you write me a letter of this sort, charging such manner of conduct to me. I've bore enough of it. I'm not a-going to stand it no more.'

Comprehension came at last to her. She leaned her fair head back a little, a gesture that was invariable with her if any creature was to be soothed, from a frightened chicken to a human. The gesture he had loved insulted his anger now.

'Oh, that letter. Davey dear, don't mind none of it, don't pay no heed to it. It don't signify a bit! Come in; do 'ee have a glass of cider and——'

'If it don't signify, where in hell's the sense of writing it?'

'Davey dear, never mind. Come in and——'

'And, if it don't signify, where's the sense of writing it every bloody time?'

Her eyes stared a little at the oath, but she made no comment.

'Davey dear——'

'Saving that up for the next letter, I suppose? "You use bad language to me as if I was a common woman off the streets,"' he mimicked, in exaggerated falsetto. 'Wouldn't say it to my face, would you? Oh no, keep it to put 'pon paper. Bah!' He spat on the grass.

Tears gathered in her big grey eyes.

'Davey dear, I was wicked to write they letters, I shouldn't ha' said it. But you don't know what it feels like, alone here, with only father. I haven't a mother to help me and advise me. I only—it's only after you've gone—that—that I remember what she told me. . . .'

She was crying now.

'What she told you? When? What did she tell you?'

'B-before she died.'

There was a pause. He must not be cheated of his just anger. Crying. Damn women. A hundred ways they had to sap a man's strength.

'Well, you can just make up your mind once and for all, your mother or me. Either you stop writing me letters like this, or I see you no more again, never. Either you

stop—but, damn it, you won't stop,' he shouted suddenly. 'You won't stop, you can't stop, it isn't in you, you cruel she-devil, you. You'll fault me, and dig at me, and reprove me, and lay it all on your dead mother in her grave. And it's you, it's you, it's you,' he repeated, conscious of his own injustice, and the more furious because of it; 'all the time it's you, and none other!'

A few big drops of rain fell, and even in the midst of her agitation he saw her glance anxiously round at the clothes on the line. Bloody Martha! He stepped close to her, and she looked round to find his red sweaty face a few inches from her own.

'Davey dear.' She stretched up her arms, to put them round his neck.

'*Davey dear.*' He tore her hands away. 'Aye. Damn fine! Davey dear when I'm by, and devil ill-treating of a poor motherless maid when I'm away, eh? One of these days I will ill-treat you—I——'

His fingers were biting into her plump smooth shoulders, and suddenly, in a realization that shocked him, he felt for the first time how passionate love can turn to lust for sheer cruelty. He felt half pleased, half horrified.

Daisy straightened herself up, and looked into his face with a dignity he had never seen in her before.

'Very well,' she said quietly and simply. 'Hurt me then, if you want to. Hurt me.'

He grinned down at her stiffly with a dry mouth.

'Clever enough. Clever enough. You know how to put a man in the wrong, don't you?'

With a gesture so sudden that it surprised him, he let her go, and stood clear from her. Then he turned on his heel and strode away.

That's all; all over. He hadn't hurt her. She couldn't say that. Walk away and leave her. That's the best way.

Oh yes. Run after me. He strode his fastest. That's good for her. That'll make her fine bosom shake.

She was close behind him now. Well, she'd had a run for her money. He dodged once or twice, till the childish indignity of it struck even him, and he stopped and faced her.

'Well,' he said, 'and what now?'

'Davey dear,' she panted. 'Don't go off from me like that—I can't bear it. Hurt me—serve me out—only don't go off and leave me. Hurt me—I want you to.'

She clung to him panting. Her blouse had come open a little in front, he could see her breast heaving, close against him. Her breath came on his face in warm sweet gusts. All his body reeled towards surrender. One moment more, and he was gone.

He seized her shoulders and held her away from him. In her breathlessness her head fell back, showing her parted lips and nostrils. He shut his eyes.

'No—you—don't,' he said slowly.

She was really frightened now, she was clinging to his arms.

'No—you—don't.'

'Davey—hurt me, beat me, anything, but open your eyes. Davey—you look awful. Open your eyes. Davey—Davey! Davey!' She screamed, tearing free a hand, and beating frantically at his face.

He smiled grimly, setting his face as against a hailstorm. What happened when one put forth one's full strength against a woman? Would she break? Would she hit her head on a stone and be killed? Well, she had a sporting chance; his eyes were shut.

Shifting his feet warily till he felt a good grip, he poised the distraught girl, took breath, and with the full deliberate might of all his body flung her from him. He heard the soft thud of her collapse and the little hiccuping cry it jerked from her. She hadn't hit a stone; good for her.

Then he turned his back on the sound, opened his eyes, and began to run. To run; just quickly at first, then furiously down the rough slope of the moor. That was the way—shut your eyes. Then they couldn't get you. Who was the chap he'd heard of at school who stopped up his ears? Never mind: better to stop your eyes. *Davey dear!* No, stop both, best of all.

He ran wildly, leaping over stones and bushes, shouting to startled ponies, laughing with what breath was in him.

'Davey dear. Da-avey dear!' he called as he flew down a steep place in great reckless strides. He'd break his leg if he put a foot down false. Never mind. Never—an enormous

raindrop hit him in the eye so suddenly that he paused disconcerted, rubbed it clear, and looked up at the sky. For a moment he was sobered, for its aspect was appalling.

On a background that in some places was the colour of a wet lead roof, and in others a livid orange, great shapes of cloud, blue, dove-grey, and black, moved restlessly. Over the valley a veritable tower of cloud continued to pile itself up into a solid mass. Smaller fragments from time to time clung to its edges, or broke swiftly from it. On his right a mass of violet and deep angry blue was tossing and shaking its edges as a petulant woman her skirts; then, in a minute, it was as though she gathered them apprehensively around her legs. A cloud across the valley, which had been moving uneasily about as if uncertain where to go, stopped as he watched it, seemed to hover, and suddenly swooped earthwards, blotting out all beneath it in the dark feathery smudge of its disintegration. A cold breeze came up towards him from the valley, as if all the air there was trying to get away before that huge, imminent bulk of cloud came down; and the whole earth seemed to be crouching, eyes half shut with terror, in anticipation of the terrific flash that should let loose the storm.

Then Dave laughed once more, breaking the spell which held him, and plunged onwards. Let it come down, a wild weather suited to his mood.

'I'll race ye,' he yelled to the lowering sky. 'I'll be below in shelter before ye come down, see if I don't.'

And he ran on even faster.

The road was below him, a staring ribbon. No sign of the two old men. They were well under cover, he thought, by now; and he spared time to chuckle, thinking of the consternation with which, from a chink in their retreat, they must be viewing so portentous a sky. Damn the day! Sweating did you no good on a day like this. The hot air pressed down on his temples. Aha, the road. Hullo, his legs were going a bit. Well, small wonder, you run nearly three miles, old boyo, and you out of training and all; what would old Harry Greenwood say, good old Harry—damn rough going here, go easy—damn—go easy—damn—easy man, easy! Blast it all, you was nearly over then.

He was breathing painfully in great gasps, and the sweat

was running into his eyes and blinding him. Ease up on the slope, can't see where you're going. Damn it all, break your bloody leg in a minute.

He had found the track now, and was stumbling along it, panting and talking to himself incoherently. He knew he was because he could hear himself. Done up a bit, old boyo; all right after a rest.

Dark. He lifted his streaming face and looked up at the sky. Black—good God!—black as ink; like a nigger's face.

Then, as he looked, the sky grinned suddenly and evilly at him. He put his hand up to his eyes, and staggered. With a rattle as of all the steeples in heaven cracking and crashing down, the storm broke, and with it, in a glaring hissing flood, the rain. Half blinded by the lightning, and deafened by the thunder, Dave cowered before the rain in sheer incredulous horror. It hit him in the face like water slapped on him by derisive devils from a bucket. There wasn't, there couldn't be, such rain. It was a river, he'd fallen in a river. Holy God, he'd be drowned! Keep your head down, you'll be drowned else.

Rain. A white, gleaming, roaring wall of rain, blotting out the land. Even the incessant lightning was only a dazzle on the rain, like light shimmering through the slats of a Venetian blind, and above the steady roar of the rain the thunder could scarcely be distinguished.

Then, abruptly, it lifted, dwindled to nothing; and David, with the roar of it in the woods below him, found himself crawling laboriously on hands and knees towards the shelter of a little group of bushes in an air the colour of pea-soup.

Better now. Cautiously he raised himself, and at last stood, barely able to support the weight of his dripping clothes. Better; it had eased off a bit. Not all over yet, though, not by a long chalk. You could almost write with chalk on that sky, it was black enough. Of course, the lightning did that, didn't it? Of course. That was the chalk. Funny thought, that. Never had a thought like that before.

The darkness thickened, and suddenly everything was hideous blazing light; and David had time to see a tree just in front of him, every branch agleam like pale silver, topple slowly over and subside. Then he fell into blackness.

Hundreds of catherine wheels of many colours were being sprayed up from a fountain in long curves. They made a whirring noise, mm-m, mm-m. They were pulling the blood in a chap's head; yes, they were most certainly pulling the blood in a chap's head, all up into a point. Unbearable tight pain, hard luck on a chap, soon it will burst. Gup—phiss—ss—ss! It's burst, those are its drops spattering his face. No it's cold, and blood drops would be hot, wouldn't they, yes, of course. It's rain, cold rain. The storm isn't over, then, no, but it's better, it isn't so heavy, that rain isn't, because he is face uppermost and if it was like it was before he'd be drowned—perhaps you are, anyway, Dave.

Lord have mercy upon us, Christ have mercy upon us, Lord have—

Where was he? For a moment he couldn't get up; then he battled through some dripping foliage, and stood up unhurt. The sky was clear, the rain was gone; under the sun the drenched landscape winked and glittered, and a thousand birds carolled wild thanksgiving for their deliverance from the storm.

Weak, but wonderfully clear in mind and spirit, he staggered out on the track, his strength coming back with every step he took. A lark shot madly up in front of him, filling the sky with a delirium of praise. Then sudden remembrance came to him, and he stopped in horror. Daisy!

All his bile and bitterness of rage had gone with the storm. Sane and clean, he was appalled to recollect what had been happening before it. Daisy—what had happened to her, lying maybe senseless in the storm, waking perhaps in terror, rising to run, struck— He winced, and fell on his knees in the road.

O God, Who has spared Thine unworthy servant—no, he was no servant of God, he who browbeat women and flung them on the ground, a strong brute—but spare her, O God, let her not be killed, O God, I love her, and maybe I've killed her.

He blundered to his feet and began in a jog-trot to make for the moor once more, whipped on by keen agony. What had come over him to behave so. He had been mad, possessed by a devil, as the saying is. Poor girl, he saw it all. It was

her very goodness he had struck at. When she was with him, she loved him so that she could refuse him nothing. When he had gone, she would remember the words of her dead mother; words to which, he now saw, in her ignorance of the world she could not give their true value, bless her poor little heart. And thus loyalty to that dead counsellor, and honest desire to break no jot of a code she had been too young to understand, had made her write those letters full of fear and anxious doubt. He pictured to himself, as he laboured on, what those last injunctions must have been: pictured the little girl by the bedside, with grey wide-open eyes, trying to take them all in and remember them. 'Yes, mother dear. No, mother dear.' Poor little Daisy; he groaned to think of his own blindness. Never mind; he would make it all up to her, if—O God!—if she were not dead, drowned, struck, if he had not killed her. But if she lived—kind God, good God, let her be alive, don't punish her for my sin—why then, he planned innumerable tender-nesses for her, making his way over the moor towards her home.

Daisy, once more hanging out her washing about an hour after the finish of the storm, looked up to see Dave stagger towards the gate. With quick solicitude she ran forward and caught him by the arm just as he was about to fall.

'Why, Davey dear,' she cried, 'you're all wet! Were you caught in the storm? Come in, my dear, and I'll get 'ee some dry clothes.'

David raised a haggard face, looked at her, and fell on his knees.

'Thank God,' he whispered, 'you're safe, you're safe.'

She blinked at him.

'I didn't hurt you? You weren't out in the storm?'

'Out in the storm? No—dear—no! What's more, I got the washing in in time, before the rain came.'

'I didn't hurt you, that—that time I threw you down?'

'No, Davey dear.' She became grave, as she helped him up the path. 'Davey, I'm sorry I vexed you so. I must have vexed you dreadful, unmeaning. I won't do it no more.'

She piloted him into the kitchen, and sat him down before

the fire. 'Sit there, till I get you some dry clothes. Then I'll go away while you changes.'

'Daisy,' he said meekly, as she went to the stairs, 'Daisy, I was out in all the rain. I was nearly drowned. . . . I saw a tree struck with the lightning close in front of me, Daisy.'

She looked back at him over her shoulder.

'Yes,' she said, 'dreadful rain, wasn't it?'

Left alone, he felt weak, and stared dully into the fire. The storm had swept him clear of anger and indeed of all emotion; he had little thought but the need to make her understand his remorse. Why wouldn't she understand at once? He was too tired to explain. Well, she was safe, anyway, thank God. Yes, thank God for that. He wasn't a murderer, anyway.

He heard her cross the room above and saw her coming down the stairs; first her feet and legs, then a bundle of clothes and last of all her face, rosy from stooping, smiled at him.

'Here be the clothes, Davey dear. They be father's. He'll have took shelter down to Merivale, I'll be bound. He's a good one to look after himself; better than my Davey.'

He caught her arm, and spoke to her almost in despair.

'Daisy, hearken to me. I was out in the storm—you don't know what it was like: I was knocked down, Daisy, almost drowned, and a tree struck flat beside me.'

'Poor darling, then. Hurry up now and change out of they wet clothes.'

'—and . . . listen, Daisy . . . when I reelized . . . I reelized that God had spared me, a awful fear came over me that you were lying out in it all, dead, that perhaps I'd killed you, Daisy. . . .'

It was no use. She was only half listening. Her eye was roving round the room towards the big oak dresser.

'Stupid!' she said, turning to him with a smile. 'I was in long before the rain came. I came straight back and took in the washing. Now hurry up, there's a dear, do, and when you're ready I'll give 'ee a glass of cordial, so as you won't take cold.'

And with a last injunction to hurry, she was gone.

Well. . . . She wouldn't understand, ever. So far as she was concerned, his agony had been for nothing. Yet he had

served her bad, there was no gainsaying that. He must treat her more loving, more understanding, in future. Perhaps no woman had more imagination than that; perhaps they were all as ready to take anything, cruelty, violence even, from the man they loved. Perhaps——

It was clear to him, as he stood up and let the sodden clothes fall heavily from his body to the floor, that, though the storm had washed away a great load of bitterness and misunderstanding, the problem of Daisy was not yet solved.

III

THE ROOK

A LITTLE gathering of rooks, maybe a dozen, sat waiting for the old man to leave his garden. They sat a couple of hundred yards away, some in a tree, some on the fence beneath it, making little guttural noises to one another. It was a fine frosty morning, and the rooks all looked amazingly big and black and glossy in the bright sunshine. One of them, balancing himself on the topmost wire of the fence, kept tilting awkwardly backwards and forwards, revealing a rain-bow sheen upon his neck and shoulders. He hung on strongly with his claws, the wire quivering beneath him. Once he titled so far that he had to use his wings to regain his balance. The flapping seemed to excite his companions: they fidgeted, and broke into a kind of chatter.

Well aware of the rooks' intention, the old man kept looking at them furtively over his shoulder, and muttering to himself. But he did not allow them to interfere with what he was doing: and paused only to rub the side of his nose with his sleeve, and to give an occasional loud sniff. He was an unlovely old man. He had next to no teeth, and his loose lips, pursed wetly up together, made a sort of horrid frill, resting upon the dirty grey frill of his beard, which in its turn was frilled out upon the red woollen muffler wound about his neck.

Straightening himself, with a last malevolent glance at the rooks, he began to hobble stiffly up the path. After a few steps, he paused, resting a hand upon his side, and a bubble of complaint came from him. Then he disappeared into an outhouse at the top of the garden.

Except that they had stopped making noises to one another, there was nothing to show that the rooks had noticed the old man go in. Then, quite casually, the rook on the fence rose, as if he were tired of an uncomfortable position, and flew to the top of the tree. Choosing another insecure perch, a twig hardly strong enough to bear his weight, he settled, and sat swinging gently up and down. There was a few seconds' pause: and then, by one consent, the whole gathering leaned forward and took off without a sound. Obeying some instinct, they swooped close to the ground, flew towards the old man's wall, careening over it, dipping again the moment it was crossed, and made for the place where he had been working. Reaching it, they nullified all their precautions by rising a few feet in the air, and letting themselves slowly settle, with outspread wings. Then instantly they were waddling and nodding hard, making the most of the stolen moments.

For a while there was nothing but sunlight, brown loam, the glossy nodding bodies and clicking beaks of the birds. Then, sharp and wicked, a crack, which put up every bird within a quarter of a mile: and the vengeful figure of the old man, rifle in hand, blinking and chuckling at the outhouse door.

'Did you get them, Da?' called a woman's voice lazily from inside.

'Did I get them! Oh, bedad, I did. Wan of them, anyway. A quare dart, I gev him! A quare dart! The dirty, thievin' divils.'

'Is he in it? Can ye get him?'

'Tcheh! I cannot, then. What do ye think I am? A jack-rabbit, is it, or a retriever dog, to be leppin' fences, an' all? Wha'?'

'It's a pity, now, you couldn't get him. If we were to get one or two of them, we could be putting them in a pie.'

The old man made a furious gesture, shooting out both his arms stiffly, from his sides.

'There ye go again!' he cried. 'There ye go again! Was there ever such a woman! Amn't I after telling ye, this hundred times and more, that it's only the little rooks do be nice in a pie.'

'Well:' the woman appeared at the door, big, still young, wiping a dish and surveyed him good-humouredly. 'Shoot the little ones, then.'

The old man lowered his head, and darted out his frilly lips. He seemed to be collecting all his passion for some venomous retort, when suddenly he tucked his rifle under his arm, and turned off abruptly down the garden.

The ringleader rook had just risen from the ground with a choice morsel, and flown to the top of a stick, when the rifle went off. As his muscles leaped into action, something struck him a terrific blow in the back, knocking him head over heels. For a moment he sprawled and bumped on the ground: then his wings, beating in a panic, pulled him up, and he followed the others. Slow at first, their wings flapping loud and fast, they gathered momentum, soared above the fence, and made for the elms in the wide school playing field a quarter of a mile away. The rook, trying frantically to catch up with them, found with dismay that he could not keep his balance. His legs and the lower part of his back had all gone numb. They trailed behind, dragging down and down, a heavy aching weight. Terrified, he flew harder than ever, and his flight became unsteady and wild. Each fresh effort sent his head and his breast vertically upwards. He rose and dipped, like a bit of black refuse on the surface of a torrent. Next he began to fly crooked, bearing away from the others in a wide arc, to the left of the trees. He did not know, but it was his instinct, realizing that he could not make the height direct, and taking him towards it by a circuit. Even so, he all but failed to reach the tree tops. Flying grew more difficult every second, his body heavier. His wing muscles ached cruelly, and he panted for breath. After little short of a circle, he saw that he was level with the others. A last effort, a sort of unsteady swoop, and he dropped thankfully at a vacant branch—only to fall heavily upon his breast.

His paralysed legs refused their hold, and he tumbled down through the branches, flapping wildly, uttering hoarse screams of consternation. For a moment he hung struggling, his left wing caught in a fork, some forty feet above the grass. Then he flapped it loose, and fell, turning helplessly over. It seemed he must crash upon the ground, but somehow, in the last fraction of a second, his wings half gripped the air, and broke his fall.

Feeling the ground thrust up against him, he tried once more to rise, but being unable to stand, he could not get his wings clear of the ground. All he could achieve was a series of agonized flops, which carried him some yards out from the foot of the tree, into the open space of the school playing field.

Except for the black untidy flapping shape, the field was empty.

Exhausted, ceasing his efforts, the rook lay upon his breast, with outspread wings, and considered. The mixture of indignation and fear, which his situation caused him, rose and fell in his mind. He could no longer feel the lower half of his body. A drowsiness came over him, a sense of temporary security. Under its influence he forgot what had happened, till a sick spasm of pain, and the strangeness of the grass pressing up against his breast, woke him to fresh terror. The instinctive reaction to terror would no longer work. He could not rise and fly away from it. He could only struggle a few inches, his wings ignobly scrabbling along on the ground. Soon that effort was too much: he was glad to leave off, and lie quiet, moving his beak from side to side in puzzled, querulous jerks.

In the big hall of the school, two priests were invigilating an examination. There was no real need for both to be there, but they had work to correct, and, as each was technically on duty, it looked better to be there, in case 'His Reverence' should poke his head in the door—as he well might.

One, dark and sturdy, sat frowning leisurely over his corrections. His face was fresh-coloured, with a blue jowl: his eyebrows met in a dark bunch, and he had wide black nostrils. Now and then he sat back, to admire the neatness with which he made a correction in blue pencil.

Presently, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the tall figure of his colleague standing near his desk. This was a younger man, very young in appearance, handsome, spare, with fair hair that looked red in some lights. His nose looked as if the sculptor had given it a firm pinch between finger and thumb, before it had set hard.

The seated priest took no notice. He started another page of corrections, and forgot the figure by his side—or got used to it in his mind. It was a surprise to him when the young priest spoke.

'*Corvus moribundus est,*' he said, little above a whisper. The other looked up.

'What?' he said. Then, taking in the remark, he turned round vaguely in his chair. 'Eh? Where?'

The younger priest nodded out towards the field. Looking, his friend saw first of all the concourse of rooks in the tree, sitting absolutely silent, without movement. Then, on the grass below, he saw the wounded rook.

'Shot?' he asked, looking up.

'Or just dying.'

'Shot, I think.' He paused, making faces in an effort not to sneeze. 'Yes; I heard a shot, just now.'

They both looked at the rook. It moved its head, and every now and then made a sort of gawky flop with its wings. Even from a distance they could see its hurt, bewildered wonder at the sudden unfamiliarity of its world.

As they looked, a man appeared on a bicycle, riding along the drive which cut the big field in two. He too saw the rook, and waved his arm to scare it. The bird, forgetting its plight, tried to rise, and drove its beak hard against the ground. Terrified, it struggled wildly, and its great uninjured wings beat it maybe a yard away from the danger before it collapsed in a sprawling heap, crushed with pain, unable to stir further. It had gained one thing, however: its back was now turned to the man, so that it could no longer see him. He rode on, in too much of a hurry to stop, screwing his face round two or three times over his shoulder, to look at the rook.

'Will I go out and put it out of its agony?' asked the young priest, when the man had disappeared.

The other started, and breathed out loudly through his nose.

‘Yes. It would be well to do that.’

‘Right. I won’t be long.’

‘No hurry. I’ll have an eye to them.’

The young priest nodded, and went across to his own desk. Opening it a little way only, and leaning back to peer inside, he reached in his hand swiftly and took out a pointer with a thick handle. He slipped it up his sleeve thin end first, made a wry grimace of a smile at his colleague, and went down the hall. A few heads were raised to look at him. One, near the door, continued to watch vacantly after him down the long stone passage.

The priest at the desk saw. Lowering his eyes to his work, he spoke tonelessly, without raising his voice.

‘McComas.’

The boy jumped, gaped at the desk, and went on with his work. The priest did not look up. He corrected a paper, pursing up his lips, fingering one side of his close-shaven chin.

But his thoughts were not on the paper, nor on the boys in front of him. All his imagination was now with the doomed rook. Blaming himself, saying that his interest was morbid, he twisted round in his chair. The rook was still in the field, lying on its breast, its wings sprawled out, moving its head in bewildered indignant jerks. There, he thought, there is a live, sentient creature, like myself: in a minute or so it will experience death, and then all its experience will be at an end, while I, who share life with it now, will still be sitting in this chair. In a dreadful sense, he envied the rook: no, perhaps not envied it, but wished for his soul’s correction and wisdom, that he could suffer with it and afterwards return to his own person. His mind was always curious after experience, hankering for it, so far as was lawful. So far, that is of course, as was con—

Ah. There was young Kerrigan, walking casually across the grass. At sight of him the rooks in the tree rose in a body and flew away. To the watcher there was something evil in their flight, as though, having gloated over their brother’s misery, they now derisively abandoned him to his death.

As he walked, Kerrigan looked about him, and up at the sky, as if he did not see the rook.

It heard his tread, and did its best to escape: but now it was too far exhausted to stir. He bent over it, grasped one wing close to the body, and with a quick movement secured the other. Thus pinioned, the rook could do nothing. It tried to turn its head and peck him, and he saw with compassion that its beak was full of blood.

The watcher from the window saw the young priest pick up the bird and walk off with it in one hand towards the boys' gardens. He admired the decision with which Kerrigan had picked it up. He himself, he knew, would have hesitated lest the bird squawk or flutter. He would have grabbed at it ineffectively, and added to its suffering.

Fascinated, despising himself, he saw Kerrigan reach the gardens, set down his burden, and take the pointer from his sleeve. Forcing his eyes away, he closed them, and muttered a prayer. O Lord, for all suffering things, that must forsake the light . . .

When next he looked, Kerrigan had taken up a fork, and was digging vigorously.

Sighing, the priest looked at the papers before him, and set himself to his work again. But the signs conveyed no meaning to him. He read the same half page three times over, his pencil waving, hesitating what to mark. Pulling himself harshly together, he read the question carefully, and marked it. Then he put the pencil down on the desk, and stared up at the honour boards at the far end of the hall. Somehow, he knew that what had happened was going to affect him all his life; that it had a meaning for him; that he would never be able to forget it.

Twenty minutes after the rook flew into the old man's garden, it lay, still warm, under two feet of dark, wet earth.

IV

PRONGS

'AY, Johnny! C'm' home. D'ye hear me tellin' ye? C'm' on home out o' that.'

But Johnny paid no attention. Crouching over the rock pool, with ragged little trousers showing, in more than one place, the bare skin underneath, he continued to gaze intently into the water, his small round face red with stooping and excitement.

His coat was many sizes too big for him. The sleeves had been cut off half-way down, and were so wide that, when he had rolled one up, his thin arm was bare to the shoulder. On the rock ledge beside him four or five prawns moved convulsively: and, reaching precariously far, with his whole arm under water, he was patiently stalking another. Slowly his red cold hand would creep towards its prey: would be just upon it: then, with a sudden flit of its tail, the prawn would shoot off backwards into another place, necessitating a change of position and a fresh pursuit. It was a cunning and elusive prawn, but the pool was not large. Even an eight-year-old could reach most parts of it, and when the prawn took refuge anywhere that was inaccessible, it could be dislodged with a piece of stick. Johnny had been chasing it for quite twenty minutes now, and was determined to have it in the end.

So he paid no heed to the impatient voice of Dan, his elder brother, a boy some twelve years old, sulkily handsome despite his rags and the dirt on his face, who sat on the sea wall a few yards off, swinging his bare legs.

For a little while there was silence, broken only by the rapt snuffles of Johnny; then Dan spoke again, more sharply: 'Johnny! Don't ye hear what I'm sayin' to ye? It's time we were gone. C'm' on home, or ye'll be gettin' me belted!'

It was no joke, sometimes, being sent out in charge of Johnny, he reflected sourly, eyeing his small brother's behind

and the soles of his feet—all of him that could be seen. Johnny was good company, and affectionate : but he resented being put in Dan's charge, and would often refuse to take his orders from him. This meant an undignified squabble. Johnny, who was very strong for his age, would lie on the ground and howl, attracting the attention and sympathy of passers-by. If they were late in reaching home, it was he, Dan, who got the blame; and, despite much experience, Johnny never seemed to realize this. He would be sorry enough afterwards, for he was a warmhearted little soul, and fond of Dan, but he never could seem to grasp beforehand that his obstinacy would get his brother into trouble. Bad trouble it was, too, if their father happened to be at home. If Jem Foster had had a drop too much, or was bad-tempered for the want of drink, he became more than ever convinced of the value of discipline in the home. As he was usually in one condition or the other, and his sole disciplinary measure was the belt, his family were at pains to give him little occasion to use it.

For there was this much in his favour—that, unlike most of his kind, he rarely laid his hand upon them unless they gave him a pretext for doing so. When there was trouble, Dan, as the elder, had to bear the brunt of it. He hated his father, and once his own fierce temper was roused, he could not conceal his hatred : wherefore his sufferings were worse than they might have been.

And here they were, the two of them, late for dinner already, and Johnny making no move to come, groping there in the pool after his blasted prawns. Prawns! He'd be belted for no prawns.

'Johnny! D'ye hear me? C'm' on out o' that. We'll be late.'

The little face, scarlet with excitement, looked suddenly round at him, sideways.

'Ah, Dan, can't we wait, only just a minyit! There's but one o' them left, only the one.'

'C'm' on, I tell ye. Ye'll be gettin' me belted again.'

'Only the one.'

And he bent again over the pool. Furious, Dan jumped down from the wall and ran over to him.

'C'm' on out o' that. I'll wait no more. Ye'll be gettin' me belted, I'm tellin' ye.'

He shook Johnny by the back of his trousers, nearly upsetting him into the pool. 'C'm' on home.'

Johnny uttered a wail of disappointment. 'You're after frightenin' him on me. I just had him. Ah, me lovely big prong—a grand big lad!'

'You and your "prongs"! ' mimicked Dan scornfully. Johnny always called them 'prongs'. 'C'm' on home, do ye hear?'

'Ah, Danny, sure, can't ye wait just one minyit—one little minyit? Sure it's early yet. Sure——'

'C'm' on.'

Out of patience, Dan jerked the small boy to his feet, and began to drag him off towards the wall.

'Me prongs! Me prongs!'

Struggling desperately, Johnny broke free, leaving a piece of tattered trouser in his brother's hand, and stooped to collect his captures. Galvanized into sudden activity, they leaped hither and thither on their sides as the small red hands groped and grabbed for them. Gathering them up, Johnny pressed the mass against his breast, and suffered himself to be led over the uneven rocks to the wall. When they reached it, Dan jumped up first, and caught at his arm to help him up. There was a scream of protest, but too late: Johnny's arm was pulled away from his chest, and several of the prawns fell upon the rocks below.

'Ah, Danny, looka, you're after making me drop them.' He put down the survivors on the wall, at a safe distance from the edge, and prepared to retrieve the others. But Danny, his patience at an end, held him fast, and began dragging him in the direction of home.

'Me prongs! I must get me prongs!'

Wailing, the small boy pulled and struggled. He was strong: he writhed and ducked and twisted, till Dan in exasperation caught him by the hair and by one of his wrists, and haled him for several yards by main force. But it was no use. Johnny flung himself on the ground. Dan grabbed at him, and smacked his head hard; whereupon Johnny caught hold of his hand, and bit it with all his might.

A few yards off three men were talking, lounging by the wall, and spitting at frequent intervals upon it: local non-descripts, usually out of a job, and well content to remain so. Although the fight was going on close beside them, they took no notice of it, and did not even look round as Dan, white with rage, kneeled on the recumbent Johnny and set about him in good earnest. Heedless of all else, the brothers fought and cursed, till an extra hard whack made Johnny give up the battle and cover his face with his hands, screaming. Dan stood up, and looked down at him.

'Now maybe ye'll come on home when I bid ye!' he said breathlessly.

But Johnny would not rise. He lay and kicked and screamed. Dan caught hold of him in some consternation, and tried to heave him upon his feet. The only response was an even shriller scream.

Then one of the men looked round. He said nothing, but, taking his pipe from his mouth, he walked quietly over, and with the full swing of his foot kicked Dan off the edge of the wall on to the rocks below. Without even looking to see the result, he replaced his pipe, walked back to his companions, and went on talking to them as if nothing had happened.

But he was soon interrupted again: this time by a furious assault from behind, by little fists beating at his thighs and a shrill voice calling filthy curses. He looked round to find Johnny, in an ecstasy of rage, squaring up to him, dancing up and down before him like a fury.

'C'm' on. C'm' on, ye big bully, ye!' screamed the little boy. 'I'll larn ye, ye big bully, ye!'

The man's jaw dropped in surprise and amusement. All three stared at the raving child, slow grins forming on their faces.

'Oho,' said the man slowly, 'me young cock-sparra, that's what ye'd be at, is it?'

Then Dan, weeping, appeared over the edge of the wall. By good fortune he was not badly hurt. Kick and fall had bruised and winded him: his forehead was scraped, and the blood was trickling from a cut on his shin: but his spirit was unbroken, and as his breath came back he cursed the man through his sobs with an expert profanity.

So they stood, a strange group: three laughing men, two weeping, furious boys; but the men were somehow ill at ease, and Dan's assailant felt a need to justify his action. He leaned upon morality.

'That'll larn ye to ill-trate them that's smaller than yeer-self!' he pronounced solemnly. 'Be off with ye now, or I'll sarve ye worse.' And he made a threatening gesture with his hand.

Dan confronted him.

'Ye will, will ye?' he cried. 'Wait till I tell me da what ye done. Wait, ye big bloody brute, ye! Wait till ye get a puck of Jem Foster's fist in yer gob, and then we'll see what ye'll do.'

Jem Foster, bedad! The men looked at one another uneasily, and the leader's face lengthened. He hadn't bargained for this. Jem Foster! This might turn out a nasty business. A bad man to quarrel with, Jem Foster. True, he wasn't famous for any great love of his children; but a bad man to cross. It would be well to run no risks with his like.

The assailant changed his tone, and the boys, at once perceiving it, began to dance up and down before him and to chant their father's name as though it were a kind of incantation.

'Are ye hurted?' asked the man with affected unconcern, coming forward to investigate; but Dan backed away and spat at him. 'Ah, well,' the man went on, 'maybe I hurted ye more than I meant. I didn't mean for ye to fall on the rocks—though, mind ye, ye richly desarved it. Didn't he, boys?'

'Richly desarved it!' echoed the other two. 'Oh, bedad, he did.'

'Still, seein' I've hurted ye more nor I meant, I'll try what can I do to make it up to ye.'

Magnanimously the man put his hand in his pocket.

'We'll make it up to him, won't we, boys?'

'Aye, sure we will.'

Between them they collected a sixpence and a handful of coppers. Dan and Johnny ceased their noise at once, and watched attentively.

Now,' said the man, holding out the coins, 'do you take these, and say nothin' to yeer da. What do ye say?'

Johnny's eyes were round. He looked at the money, and then at his brother. Dan wavered: all his resentment seemed suddenly to have left him, and he answered almost sadly.

'I can't take yeer money,' he said. 'Me da would never suffer me to take a gift of money.'

The man cajoled him. 'Ah, come on, now, alanna. Take it, and yeer da'll be none the wiser.' Dan shook his head.

'I can't take a gift,' he repeated. 'I've nothin' to give ye in exchange.'

Suddenly, as if he had been stung, Johnny went down on all fours, and in a moment was on the rocks under the wall, ferreting about feverishly. The man stopped to stare at him.

'What the——' he began.

'The prongs,' cried Johnny. 'The prongs, Dan darlin'—me lovely prongs. Look at here: I have the best of them still. Here, take them, and give them to the gentleman—and ye can take the money, then. Isn't that so, mister?' His small face wrinkled up at the man in eager inquiry. 'Isn't that so?'

'It is indeed,' replied the man. 'What is it ye have? Praans, is it? Indeed, and I'll buy them off o' ye, and glad to do it. I have a great likin' for praans.'

'Here they are.' Johnny poured the limp green creatures into the big brown hand, opened dubiously to receive them.

'There's one trodden on, but ye can still ate him.'

'Faith, and I can so.' The man looked into his palm with pretended enthusiasm. 'And here's yeer money.'

He tipped the coins into Dan's still shaking hand.

'And ye'll say nothin' to yeer da?'

'Nothin'.'

The man saw that he could be trusted; and so it came about that, a minute later, the three were congratulating themselves on having got out of a nasty position, and the two boys were hurrying homeward, Johnny trotting at his brother's side, from time to time looking anxiously up at his face.

They were terribly late for the meal. Jem was in. He scowled at them as they entered, and began fumbling at his belt. Their mother's face showed pale in the gloom behind him.

But Johnny gave him no time.

'I'm terrible sorry we're late, da,' he babbled hurriedly. 'We was catchin' prongs—and—and a gentleman said he'd buy them off of us—and we stayed on and caught a lot—and Dan has the money here. Looka, da!'

Jem eyed them and the money, in two minds. Ordinarily there would have been an outburst; but he was very dry, and the money was there, right enough; so he grabbed it, and with a growl motioned the boys away. The woman's face showed piteous relief, and the two, glad enough to escape, hastily followed her out to the yard, where she had a meal of potatoes and buttermilk waiting for them.

After they had eaten, they climbed a little way up the hill, past the tethered goat, to a grassy place between grey rocks, from which they had a wide view of the harbour and the sea—climbing slowly, for Dan's hurts were stiffening, and he hobbled painfully on the slope. They sat down together, facing the sea, in silence. It was a dead calm, and very clear. The horizon was a dark line drawn between sea and sky, and a ship which had sunk below it left a dark blue smudge of smoke, faint, motionless, incredibly distant.

Presently Johnny moved closer to his brother.

'I'm sorry, Danny,' he whispered. 'Is your hurts painin' ye? I'm sorry.'

Dan did not seem to have heard; he still looked out to sea; but after a few moments his arm moved around Johnny's neck, and he began absentmindedly to stroke his hair. With a sigh of happiness, the little boy snuggled closer, and shut his eyes.

TRAVELLERS

THE driver pointed with his whip toward a high round hill on my side of the jaunting-car, and shifting his quid, spat clear of the wheel with great precision.

‘Just forenint o’ where that cross is now—before it was stuck up there, d’ye see—there was a poacher met with a gamekeeper. The gamekeeper was out a long time lookin’ for this same poacher, a lad that had bested him more than once, an’ one night the’ met, just forenint that cross: only the cross wasn’t there, d’ye see: it was—hol’ up!’

The mare pecked suddenly and recovered, and the driver broke off his narrative to pull on the reins.

‘There’s no knowin’,’ he continued, after a minute, ‘which one o’ them seen the other first. Mebbe both the same time. But there was two shots fired, as near together as no matter; and there the two o’ them was found the day after, dead corpses, lookin’ at each other. The doctor said, judgin’ by th’ examination of them, they was neither one killed off straight, but they must have stuck there some time watchin’ one another die, and maybe with only the breath to let a curse on each other and they goin’ off.

‘The friends o’ the two o’ them met in Inchileenagh, and first they was for fightin’: but one o’ them says: “Let up, boys,” says he, “sure it’s a clean score, an’ they’re both quit. Neither one o’ them is left livin’ after the other,” says he, “so it’s a clean score.” So they made friends on that, and drinks all round, and they put up the cross between the lot o’ them.’

He shifted his quid once more, and we jogged on in silence. I was but fifteen; illness had kept me away from school, and so, when a cousin came back on leave from the East, my father had been glad to suggest that the two of us should travel about Ireland. For pretext, we left letters upon my father’s old clients, but they were of no real importance, merely settling for us where to go, and taking us to out-of-

the-way places. We were the best of friends, despite eight years between us, and the days were good.

We came to the top of a steep hill: the driver delivered a sudden exhortation to the mare, and clapped on the brake. Close before us, in a hollow, lay the little town of Inchilee-nagh; only the sharpness of the hill had prevented us from seeing it sooner. The mare, her ears cocked, put her feet down warily, sliding forward a little with each step. The car lurched violently, and we sat at an angle, protecting our hip-bones from the little iron rail above the cushion, and studying the view as best we might.

Near the foot of the hill was a sharp curve to the left. Sloping at improbable angles, we negotiated it somehow, but not until we were well round did we see what was happening in the road before us.

A big man, hot and uncomfortable, with a soft felt hat and a walking-stick, had appeared from a laneway and was walking quickly towards the town, pursued by a little woman in black. He hurried on, trying to ignore her, but she caught him up and began clutching at his sleeve, beating at him with her hands, and crying out something which we could not hear. The big man stopped, and we caught sight of his profile as he put out a hand to restrain her. Neither saw us; and as we came nearer she broke through his half-hearted defence and beat at his face.

Our driver gave a short bark of amusement, but I was shocked at the sight; the big man, his hat all crooked, his face red and sheepish, clumsily holding off the little old woman, trying to quiet her in tones of foolish expostulation: she beating in his arms like a black withered bird, repeatedly landing a blow on his chest and chin—the extent of her reach.

‘Go to her, then,’ she screamed breathlessly, as we came close. ‘Go to her. You’re free, do you hear! Free, free, free!’

And on each word she struck at him with all her might.

Suddenly the man looked up and saw us. Even so he could not quiet the woman till we were almost upon them. Then, seeing that they were observed, the woman stood

aside, panting, dishevelled, to let us pass. The man, very red and flustered, straightened his hat and drew himself up in an attempt at dignity and unconcern; and, once we had passed them, I did not look back. It was the first time I had seen a grown person stripped of self-possession, and I felt that I had witnessed something indecent.

My cousin noticed my distress, and turned to the driver with a laugh.

‘Queer things still happen in these parts,’ he said.

‘Oh, indeed the’ do.’

And then, as we had reached the foot of the hill, he shot off the brake, flicked the mare lightly with the whip, and we drove into the town of Inchileenagh with a flourish. The Imperial Hotel had been recommended to us as the least villainous of three, so there we went, left our traps, and ordered an early dinner. Then we got back in the car, the hour being about half-past five, and went on to discharge our one piece of business.

When we returned, we decided to spend the rest of the time before dinner in exploring the town. Inchileenagh was like many other small country towns in Ireland. The streets were narrow, rather dirty, and full of public houses. At one end was the river, crossed by an old bridge of singular beauty, with ivy-covered piers. Along it loafed a number of men, some sitting, some leaning, all spitting meditatively into the water. There was a police station, and a town hall; and as we reached the latter, we saw that something unusual was in the air. A number of crates and some pieces of tattered scenery, looking incredibly garish in the summer evening, were being unloaded from a lorry, and carried in at an obscure folding door at the end of the hall. Upon the crates, in large but faded letters, ran the legend: ‘The O’Donovan-Morgan Opera Co.’: and a little farther on we found a bill with full particulars. *Faust* was the opera with which, ‘by special request,’ the town of Inchileenagh was to be favoured. Then followed a list of the company’s personnel. Beyond such attributes as ‘the eminent tenor,’ ‘Ireland’s favourite soprano,’ and the like, the bill was reticent about all the singers save one: but upon this one it let itself go with considerable freedom.

At the end of the list was magnificently inscribed:

and
MURTAGH McCARAGH

The celebrated Baritone

Of the Royal Opera, Covent Garden; The Royal Carl Rosa Opera Company; The Moody-Manners Opera Company; etc., etc.

My hopes rose high. I had never heard a great singer, and had often longed to do so.

'Dennis,' I said, turning eagerly to my cousin, 'what luck. But what is a man like that doing here?'

'I can't tell you,' he replied. 'Probably some old crock on his last legs. Or drink, perhaps. Still, we'll go.'

We booked seats there and then, the best to be had, and I went back to dinner reluctantly. I was fifteen, and so, I suppose, should have outgrown my first excitement about the stage. But there it was; and I gazed with great respect and a secret envy upon the slightly shabby persons who were congregated about the 'stage door'.

We had ordered our dinner, so nothing remained but to find and eat it. An attempt upon the 'Coffee Room' was frustrated in the nick of time by an embarrassed damsel, who explained breathlessly that 'it wasn't fit' and conducted us to the 'Commercial Room'. Here we found a table set for three, and, in the window, the gentleman with whom we were evidently to share it. This gentleman, upon our entrance, lowered his paper and gazed at us without expression. My cousin rose to the situation at once.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' he said, advancing with a charming smile. 'I'm afraid we are intruders here: but, really, we've no choice. They wouldn't let us into the other room. I hope you have no objection to our sharing this one with you.'

The gentleman smiled amiably, and executed a courteous gesture with his fat hand.

'None in the world,' said he. 'Sure I'm glad of company. So they wouldn't let ye into the coffee room?'

'They wouldn't.'

'An' small wonder. 'Tis stiff with shifts and chemises, it is, and they on the back of the chairs to dry. Ah, they've no idee. Look at that, now.'

He pointed with the stem of his pipe at an object which had caught my eye already—a stuffed fox, over whose back was stiffly draped a doormat.

‘Will you believe me, now,’ continued our friend, ‘but the little girl was for skelping that mat in here. Brought it in here, she did, and cocked it up on the fox. “Glory be to God, girl,” says I, “ye’re not going to beat that in here?” “The mistress is after tellin’ me to beat it,” says she. “But she didn’t tell ye to beat it in here,” says I; “get away out o’ this now, or it’s yourself will be beat,” says I, “and not the mat.” So she gives me a grin and off with her, and glad enough to spare the work.’

The gentleman paused, and spat out of the window. ‘Ah, sure,’ he said, replacing his pipe. ‘They know no better. They’ve no idee.’

He was a stoutish little man, bald on the top of his head, with a red face, a straggly moustache the worse for nicotine, and goggle eyes. All the same, there was something attractive about him, and we found ourselves liking him as the meal went on.

‘Ah, yes,’ said he, his mouth full. ‘It’s not a bad life, ye know. Of course, there’s draabacks. Hotels is bad sometimes—this is one of the good ones, for they try to make ye comfortable, even if ye have to tell them the way—and railway stations in winter is the divil. And, of course, ye can’t always choose yer company. Sometimes the company in the commercial room is mixed—very mixed. There’s a lot of fellas get into the profession nowadays that has no respect for its traditions—no respect at all. We wouldn’t have tolerated the like in the old days. But generally speaking there’s pleasant company, and plenty of it.’

‘But don’t you find it a trial to be so often away from home?’ asked my cousin.

‘Well, now’—he wiped his moustache with the back of his hand—‘you’re right. Yet, in a manner of speaking, it’s not such a draaback as it looks. D’ye know Rathmines? Ye do. Well, I’ve a nice little spot there, with a grand view of the mountains—I’m at home, I was saying, about one night in the week, maybe two; my wife’s always eager and glad to see me, and so are the children, and that’s a good thing, anyway.’

He told us more about his children and his home, and then stopped. My cousin no less confidentially told him our story. He proved to be as good a listener as talker; asking a shrewd question from time to time, with many an interjected 'Well, now,' and 'Do ye tell me that,' and, above all, with an interest so unfeigned as to charm any narrator. When we came to the subject of my illness, he turned to me with such ready concern that my heart was finally won.

'But, sure, you're over yer weakness now?' he asked me, picking his teeth.

I hastened to answer that I was, whereon he gave me an approving nod, and leant back in his chair.

'Are yez going to the op'ra?' he inquired presently.

'We are,' replied my cousin. 'But tell me now—you're sure to know—this man McCaragh—is he all they say he is?'

'Oh, indeed he is, and damn the lie. Many's the time I've heard him.'

'Well, why is he here?'

Our friend in expressive pantomime lifted his little finger and titled back his head.

'That same,' he replied. 'They could never be sure would he be able to go on or not, and he had such a grand voice they gave him all the chances they could. But sure, it was the same in every troupe he joined: and after he'd let them down two or three times, they'd fire him off, and so down he'd go, and down, till he comes to sing *Faust* in Inchileenagh.'

'But isn't his voice all to bits?'

'It is not, and isn't that the queer thing? Mind ye, he's on in years, and it's not the voice it was: but it's a damn fine voice all the same. And you're pretty safe of him now, what's more, for he hasn't enough to make himself drunk. It takes a hell of a draught to put him under.'

'Do ye know how they found him? Faith, it beats the finding of McCormack altogether. Did ye ever hear tell of the gallery o' the Gaiety Theatre, in Dublin?'

My cousin smiled.

'Ye know the way they had of singing in the waits of an opera. One fella would sing this bit, and another fella that bit, as well as the fellas on the stage some times, begob.'

Well, it was in *Rig'letta*: and young Murtagh was up in the gallery.

'After one of the scenes, when the curtain was down, someone turns to Murtagh and says: "That's a grand singer!" says he. "Do ye think so?" answers Murtagh back to him (he had drink taken, even then). "Do ye think so?" says he. "Bedam, but I could do it better than that meself." "Ah, how are ye?" says the fella to him, daring him. "I'll show ye can I," says Murtagh, and he stands up and starts off—he had a grand strong voice.

'Well, sure, in a minute every head was turned round, stalls and boxes and all, looking up to the gallery, for they never heard the like.

'When he done there was great hand-clapping, and presently one of the attendants comes up and wants to know who it was done the singing. Murtagh was for showing fight, because he thought they were coming to fire him out, but the attendant swore there was no harm intended to him. So down he goes to the fella that owned the troupe.

"It was you was singing, was it?" says he to Murtagh.

"It was," says Murtagh, a bit daunted by the white shirt of the fella, "but sure, I meant no harm."

"H'm," says the manager man. "And what trade might ye follow?"

"I'm a porter, sir," says Murtagh.

"Well," says the manager, "ye'll be a porter no longer," says he, "for ye'll come along with me, and I'll make a singer of ye. What's more, if ye'll do what I tell ye, I'll make a damn fine singer of ye."

'So Murtagh went off, and in less than three years he came back and gave a concert at the Rotunda: and every one said no better voice came out of Ireland, not even Foli himself. I tell ye, that man's sung half over the world: if he could only have stuck it, he'd be in the top flight.'

'And here he is now,' said my cousin, making patterns with the breadcrumbs on the cloth.

'And here he is now, as ye say,' replied our companion, 'singin' *Faust* to gomachs in Inchileenagh. Ah, well—he stretched himself, and yawned enormously—'sure it's an event for the place.'

'Very little happens here, I suppose?'

'Little enough. And what does happen has no sense.'

'What do ye mean, exactly?'

'Well, it's this way.' He turned himself sideways in his chair, and frowned up at the sluggish flies around the gas-jet on the ceiling. 'What goes on here goes on sleeping, underground: ye see nothin' of it. Then, one day, all of a sudden, something'll happen, and no reason to show—no reason at all.'

'Like the gamekeeper and the poacher who shot each other?' I interjected shyly. He gave me a quick look.

'Aye, like that,' he said. 'Bang-bang. That's all. No why nor wherefore, not a word ye might hear till the two dead corpses are staring ye in the face. Oh, it's queer, the way things go on in these parts.' He rose and walked over to the window.

'For that matter,' he said, over his shoulder, 'if ye'd been here a bit sooner before your dinner ye'd have seen something happen, here under this window.'

'Yes?'

'I heard a noise, but I didn't heed it much, till the little girl ran up full of it. An old woman in a fit, and I was just in time to see them cartin' her into the chemist opposite.'

My cousin and I looked at each other.

'What was she like?'

'Faith, a little old woman in black, with a bonnet on her. I didn't see but the white of her face as they carried her in. Why,' he said, screwing up his eyes at us, 'do ye know her?'

'No,' said my cousin, 'but we saw an old woman on the road as we were coming along.'

'Well, the poor soul,' said he, turning to the window again, 'I'm thinking it's her last jaunt, for they were saying below she'd never over it. H'm.' He hummed a few bars. 'Are ye going? Well, I'll see ye at the opera.'

In a few minutes we were outside strolling towards the town hall. I was strangely moved, and felt within me an exaltation, a sudden perception of the wonder of life, which brought a lump into my throat. The bridge was almost deserted. The sun was sinking, and the town, the trees, the distant

hills swam before my eyes in kindly gold. I trod upon air: and with every step my soul went out towards the uncouth stranger who had shared our meal. Here, I thought, are three human beings, dissimilar as may be, whom chance has brought together: fellow-travellers, fellow-adventurers, bound alike to life, telling each other in perfect trust their fortunes and their hopes. It was my first actual realization of the brotherhood of man. One cannot at this distance convey the full sense of that discovery; at fifteen these moments have a convincing beauty that later years cannot describe.

We were soon inside the hall, seated upon chairs reserved for 'the quality,' covered, two whole rows of them, with crimson baize. As it happened, we were isolated, for 'the quality' was apparently the one section of Inchileenagh which did not patronize the opera, and our only companions we suspected of being the editor of the local paper and his wife, with free passes.

The performance was to consist of the solos and concerted numbers of the opera, for the company did not run to a chorus: and, not more than ten minutes after the advertised time, lights were lowered, and the overture struck up on the piano.

The company—I remember their names still, as well as if I had the programme in my hand: Mr. Leo Peabody, the Faust, thin and reedy, but true and never unpleasant; Mr. Carlos Gooding, the Mephisto, with an exaggerated *vibrato* and mannerisms; Miss Susanne Perle, the Marguerita, surprisingly good, but no longer young; Miss Sybil Child, who, by quick changes of wigs and garments, doubled the parts of Siebel and Martha, singing both in a fresh, unspoiled contralto: and, last and greatest—Murtagh McCaragh.

The scene where the Mephisto turns the water of the fountain into wine was cut, so we had to wait till Valentine's *cavatina* to gain a sight of the great man. The preliminary bars clanked from the piano, and from the wings appeared—the big man we had seen on the road. It was a shock, yet hardly unexpected; however, I had no time to think about it then. The audience greeted him with enthusiasm. He smiled easily, fumbled in his ample breast for Marguerita's token, and began to sing.

My first feeling was one of disappointment. Never having heard a great singer, I suppose that in my ignorance I had expected something volcanic: and the voice in the short recitative, though easy and full, seemed to me in no way remarkable. The singer, too, seemed indifferent to his work.

Then—suddenly—a change came over him. As the piano sounded the introduction to the *aria*, he shut his eyes. It might have been fancy, but I could swear a tremor ran through him: he smiled to himself, and when he opened his eyes again, their light was different. The look of bored good-humour had given place to a strange gleam, almost of defiance. We were sitting right under him, and could see his smallest movement.

Then, once more, he closed his eyes, and sang. The great notes rolled out pure and full, with an exaltation, an almost savage power, that seemed to thrill through the very chairs we sat on. When he came to the martial movement, he opened his eyes and declaimed it with a volume and a fire which was literally frightening. Then his voice sank magnificently back upon the slow swell of the air. Inevitable as a great wave sweeping to the shore, it rose towards the climax of the music, gleamed there a moment in majesty, and rolled out the final notes in rings and rings of sound.

There was a silence, then applause. It was frantic. We clapped and stamped and shouted: I only stopped when my hands hurt too much to go on. McCaragh himself seemed almost dazed: then his face lit up with an expression hard to analyse. Many times he had to come on, and bow again, and yet again, with a certain ironic dignity; yet it was obvious that he had been deeply moved. When at last he disappeared, I sat back exhausted, let my aching hands lie limp, and murmured to myself over and over again—I don't know why:

“I am the Duchess of Malfi still.”

There is little else that I remember till the scene of Valentine's death. In the duel trio McCaragh carefully 'sang down' to the others, and they, to do them justice, had been roused rather than discouraged, doing their best not to disgrace their great colleague. Indeed, with all its inadequacies,

I have never seen a more spirited performance of *Faust* than that handful of singers gave with their clanking piano in the town hall of Inchileenagh. There was magic abroad; they were possessed with it.

The duel was over: Mephisto's treacherous blade had done its work (amid loud booing from the black seats) and Valentine lay writhing on the ground.

The music does not seem sublime to me now, and I have heard many Valentines curse many Margueritas, but I have never known the scene played as those two played it. The man was inspired. Between him and the audience flowed that magic current that made the moment apt for a revelation. The facile phases were transfigured, the whole place filled with the agony and pity of noble strength treacherously brought low: and there was fear also, as if a lion that could no longer strike still cowed the hunters by the sheer terror of his wrath. The whole barbaric power of that great voice attacked each note of denunciation with stunning force, and the soprano herself recoiled, in an excitement that left her pale and breathless, from the rage and spate of sound.

I have often wondered if we were all hypnotized into believing it better than it was, for of course any artist's success must always depend partly upon his audience's will to believe. There can be no doubt, however, that we heard a great singer on one of those nights when his fire burnt at its highest and nothing stood between him and fulfilment. We were uplifted, shaken, dazed, beside ourselves. I sat trembling from head to foot, till the last trio swung us out into the street and the cool air.

The long summer night still held the sky, and a gentle breeze refreshed our foreheads. We crossed the bridge, and walked until we reached the gloom of a little wood, a chill cavern of darkness, astir with scents and the scurrying of little beasts. We stood drinking in the sweet air; and then turned slowly back. Over a blunt low hill on our right a faint radiance hovered. It grew steadily, and the line of the hill showed more and more distinctly. Then a gleam winked and trembled on the dark line, and the enormous moon, wavering and unstable, shouldered her bulk into the heaven. We watched till she rose clear of the hills, gaining dignity and

radiance at every minute, and then walked homeward, with our shadows gradually deepening before us.

At the foot of the stairway we met our friend, who had seen us through the glass door of the bar, and stepped out to meet us. He said nothing, but raised his eyebrows in inquiry. We nodded. He nodded back; and there we stood, our hearts overflowing with delight, nodding at each other in absurd enthusiasm. Yet he knew nothing of the mystery we shared. 'What goes on here, goes on sleeping, underground; ye see nothin' of it, then, one day, something happens. . . .' This time we had seen a little more. Not much more, but enough to give to what had happened a double significance.

'Are ye goin' to bed? Yez are? Well, I'd better say good-bye to ye so, for I've an early start before me. What—you have an early start, too? Faith, that's grand. We'll meet at breakfast, then. Good night to ye both.'

And with a wave of his hand he went back to the bar.

A minute later I was in my room. I did not want to talk, nor I think did my cousin. The moon was flooding in at the window: I crossed to the broad ledge, and sat there with my knees drawn up, looking down on the empty street. Now and then a man would go by, and voices would sound for a moment: otherwise the night was still and peaceful.

How long I had been there I do not know, when suddenly my attention was caught by the two figures in the street. They came along, clear in the moonlight, and passed close to where I sat: McCaragh and the soprano. He was talking to her, earnestly, in low tones, gesticulating with one hand. She walked silently, with little steps, her shoulders hunched up and her eyes on the ground. Close to me they passed, down the street, and round the corner out of sight.

I did not try to piece out their story, and have never really tried since; but I sat on there till I was stiff, and the moon had wheeled a great course in the sky, pondering with secret fear and joy upon the heritage of life which was mine. The driver, the little old woman, our friend the traveller; *Faust*, the pinewood, and the moon rising—what a day I had been through. And now this last incident in the drama—enacted for me alone.

The moon rose higher, and the shadows in the little street

changed their shape. Distant, faint in the moonlight, stood the hill where the gamekeeper and the poacher had fought their strange duel. Soon all movement ceased, and, except maybe for a big man and a woman talking somewhere down by the river, there was stillness in the town where things happened that had no sense to them.

VI

THE GATES

CRASH!

Old Sam Henniker leaped up in his bed, knowing on the instant what had happened: the 7.1 had fouled the gates. He knew at once, because he had dreamed the disaster scores of times, starting bolt upright, to be reassured by darkness and quiet all around. But this was more terrible than the dream: over and above the splintering of wood and the grind of lacerated metal came a fearful bumping, a thud which shook the house, and, at the end of all, a forlorn tinkle of broken glass.

She'd fouled the gates. He must have overslept horribly. Then his alarum-clock had not gone off. Shaking from head to foot he tumbled out of bed and ran over to it. Peering at it in the half-light, he saw, with a cold, sick feeling, that it had not been set overnight. And all this in a few seconds: the steam of the train was still drifting sluggishly over the misty fields as Sam stood there in his nightshirt, the clock in his hand, staring upon tragedy.

He had forgotten to set the clock. That was worse, to Sam, than the disaster it had entailed. Punctual, accurate, regular in his habits as a machine, he had always switched off the alarum on getting up each morning, lest in the afternoon it should disturb the house with an unmeaning summons; and reset it before going to bed at night. He had done it for more years than he could reckon. And last night, suddenly, inexplicably, he had gone to bed without setting it—had overslept—and the 7.1 had fouled the gates.

But he was a railwayman still; and so he roused himself quickly, slipped on his coat, trousers, and peaked cap, and went down to survey the damage. In the grey wet morning light it was plain to see. Above the crossing the line curved, which prevented the driver of the train from getting a view of the gates till he was almost upon them. Of course, he should whistle, but there were few formalities on the little single line, and Sam's reputation for punctuality would in any case have been his own undoing: moreover, even if the driver had whistled, it would have been too late. The train had evidently taken the obstacle at full speed. One gate—the second—had been flung bodily aside, and seemed to have suffered little damage: but the other was dashed to pieces. The heavy post, torn from its socket in the ground and dragged for several yards by its twisted metal bar, had smashed a corner of the fence and fetched up against Sam's oilhouse; that accounted for the bumping noise. Bits of metal and wood were scattered all about the line; there was a great scar across the painted woodwork of the little ground frame hut, and its window was broken. Even then Sam wondered that in the midst of such huge destruction he should have heard this little sound so clearly.

Well, his job was plain before him. The metals were clear, but he proceeded to move any fragments that might possibly be in the way of the upcoming train, and then turned back to the house to dress.

At the door he was met by his little grandson, with white wondering face and round eyes. The boy looked up at him, and his lips moved in silent question.

'Train. Fouled gates,' said Sam gruffly, with a funny backward swing of his arm towards the disaster; and he brushed past the boy and stumped upstairs.

As he lathered his chin before the little cracked glass by the window, he heard the arrival of Mrs. Jarvis who 'did' for them. 'Oooh my!' she said. 'Wattever——'

He lost the rest, but could hear the boy's voice answer her, and their hushed voices as they gazed upon the destruction. Sam gritted his teeth. Then he heard her, as usual, moving about in the kitchen, getting the breakfast ready.

A few minutes later, he was sitting opposite his grandson

at the table, outwardly as much the martinet as ever; but he found it hard to meet the boy's eyes. Never troubling, as a rule, to read another's thought, he could see criticism grow each moment in his grandson's mind. Grandfa, so punctual, so unfailing, so merciless to the slovenly or forgetful; grandfa, by whom the people set their clocks of a Saturday as he went down to the village for his evening glass—grandfa had overslept, and let the train smash up the gates. Grandfa had made a terrible mistake. Grandfa. The child's world rocked upon its foundation. Slowly, with the full tide of inevitable knowledge, he was learning that grandfa was only a man, an ordinary man, liable as any other man to make mistakes. And the old man saw it all, and suffered torments. He wanted to say: 'Swally up thy porridge, don't thee stare to me!' but somehow he could not. Still, age was age, and right was right; so presently, with a real effort of courage, he looked up and met the accusing eyes.

'Come along with 'ee,' he said gruffly. ''Tis getting late.'

The boy's eyes dropped at once, and he finished up the remains of his porridge. After that they did not speak at all; and the boy, as soon as they left the table, got his satchel and started off for school guiltily. He saw already that the disgrace would affect him as well, that there would be questions to answer, and jeers to bear; and suddenly he realized that he loved his grandfather, and longed to defend him. He had always spoken, at school, as if the work of the crossing was shared between them. 'Us lets train through,' he would say, and describe the process in detail to an interested circle. Well, this morning, what would he say? 'Us overslepped, and train fouled gates.'

'Grandfa overslepped. . . .'

'Grandfa forgot to set the clock, so us overslepped. . . .'

'Us forgot to set the clock. . . .'

No; there was no need to go that far; he was always in bed long before the clock was set. 'Grandfa . . . ' 'Us . . . ' He shuffled along the lane, in the gutter, struggling. . . .

As soon as Mrs. Jarvis, frightened and constrained, had hurried the breakfast-things from the table and shut the scullery door behind her, the old man sat with his pipe unlighted, and tried to cope with the disaster which had

befallen him. It was as if a devil had flung into the regularity of his life this unforeseen and unbelievable horror. He was a good, steady man; said his prayers daily to the Lord and attended meeting regularly; more than that, there was a class of boys who assembled respectfully, every Sunday afternoon, to hear Mr. Henniker expound the Word of God. Bruised and bewildered, he searched his conscience, and could find no sin, no backsliding, to warrant this cruel visitation. 'Tis a dream,' he thought, and half rose from his chair; but even through the window he could see enough, and he sat down again.

The 8.40 up found Sam, as ever, in the little ground frame hut, looking grimly out at the broken window. He heard it whistle, excessively and ostentatiously, below the straight, and set his jaw. There would be a deal of this sort of thing to face. They'd have had a fine tale, down at the station; they'd none of them be sorry to get one in on old Sam Henniker. Old Sam, who had refused to come out on strike; who had argued so uncompromisingly, in the bar of the Blue Boar, against shorter hours, the modern labouring man, the unpunctuality and thriftlessness of the young; oh, they'd have it in for old Sam all right. But Joe the driver, as he passed, made him a face of comic dismay, in which there was no unkindness. 'Well, you 'ave been and gone and done it, and no mistake,' the face said, not without sympathy; and, to his amazement, Sam instinctively made a grimace in return. Then he was angry with himself for wanting sympathy.

Traffic on the road was limited to bakers' carts and a farmer or two on a nag; but to-day, these, stopping at the crossing, gaping at the damage, and commenting thereon, made up by concentration for their lack of numbers. Never had the place seemed so populous. Sam eyed them grimly; they speculated among themselves upon the causes of the disaster, looking sideways at him, but none ventured to ask the old man a direct question.

That afternoon, Sam sat down and penned his official report of the accident. It was brief and bare: the work of a proud man, humble in so far as he was at fault, but neither asking for, nor expecting, pardon. In his own eyes the offence was unforgivable. He would show no mercy to a

subordinate who had committed it, and he found none for himself. His one duty had been to keep the line clear for six trains a day, and he had failed to do so. Thirty years of such service, ever since the line was opened, counted in his mind for nothing. It was the unpardonable offence, and, by some mysterious fate which he could not understand, he, of all men, had committed it.

It was not till two days afterwards that a gang arrived to put up a new pair of gates. Sam, fearing men who knew him, was relieved to see a regular gang from a town quite thirty-five miles distant. He found, with something of a shock, that they took the accident much as a matter of course. They talked of other things; and when he fought down his pride sufficiently to ask if they had much work of the kind, they reassured him with ready sympathy. Bless him, yes. Why, one gate on the Tilton line had been broken twice inside three months.

'You won't get the sack, master, not as 'tis the first time,' added one, misunderstanding him.

Sam stiffened all over, went abruptly into the house, and sat on a chair in the kitchen. He would have liked to be angry: he ought to have been angry, he told himself fiercely, and put the young chap in his place; yet in some curious way his heart could not help recognizing the rough kindness, and being grateful for it.

'Takes it 'ard, 'e do,' said one of the men to another; and when, presently, they laughed over another matter, Sam savagely supposed that they were laughing at him, and marched down to the farthest corner of his neat vegetable garden to be out of sight and hearing.

The next day was Saturday, Sam's evening for visiting the inn. He spent the day fighting his fears. All would laugh and sneer at him. For long years he had checked and censured them, so stern with himself, so unflinching in his own life that they could not grudge his right to find fault. Now he had failed. But to stay away would be cowardice. He became angry, unfair. Why need he mind them, the trash? What did it matter what they said? And he stumped fiercely down the long hill to the village.

He was right—there was a change. Women, gossiping at

their doors in the soft failing light, hushed their voices and stared at him—with pity, could he have seen it. Children playing in the gutters paused to look, with open mouths. The unhappy man, his eyes fixed on his road, felt as if heads and mocking voices were closing in behind him, dark and chuckling, as the waters close behind a boat at nightfall. He reached the inn; for just a second he hesitated on the sandy threshold, then entered boldly.

He scarcely noticed who was in the bar. There was a group in one corner. He ordered his glass, and sat lonely on the big settle farthest from the fire, which had just been lit, and was burning brightly but indecisively. There had been a murmur of greeting as he came in, and he had heard himself answer. Misery crushed and scalded him. He had felt little in his life—not since Ann had died; never anything shameworthy, like this; he was not accustomed to such suffering, and he bore it hard. They were talking among themselves. A curse rose suddenly and bitterly in old Sam's heart. Ordinarily it would have shocked him, for he never swore. Yet it came naturally now. Well, let them talk, the ——! He suddenly realized that he had drunk all his beer, without tasting it, and that his mouth was still dry and thirsty. His eyes smarted, and a pain ran down his side and down his legs. Then there was a movement in the group, and a man approached and stood over him—Jim Watkins. Sam turned up to him a face of animal defiance.

'Sam,' said the man, 'come and have a drink with us, and cheer thee up.'

Sam swallowed with stiff jaws, and looked at him without speaking. A second man rose from the group, and joined Watkins.

'You've had a misfortin', Sam,' he said, 'and us be sorry for't. You'm a proud man, a steady-going man, and nobody likes to 'ave their mistakes spoke much of, you least of all. Still, 'tis a misfortin', and us be sorry; and us would take it very kind if you would come and have a drink with us, in token of goodwill.'

Tears rose to the red rims of Sam's eyes. It was dead against his principles to take a second glass, but he must now. His heart warmed to the men.

'Thank 'ee,' he answered huskily; 'you're very kind, and I'll be glad.'

An hour later he was on his way home, walking furiously fast, as ever, his heart warm with gratitude and an unaccustomed heat of liquor. For the first time since the crash, he felt almost happy. It wasn't so bad after all. He had misjudged the good folk sinfully: he must pray to be forgiven that. Kind folk they were. Tears came to his eyes, happy tears, for the drink had made him emotional, and his quick steps were a little unsteady. Every one made a mistake sometimes. It wasn't so bad. He stamped his feet hard on the rough road, and took the steep finish of the hill at a pace which few young men in the district could have equalled. He came out upon the dark moor above the crossing; a bullock was lying in the road, and he bore down upon it. 'Hoy!' he barked, and the animal rose lumberingly and let him pass. He even whistled a few long-forgotten notes, as the shape of the house loomed up, and the white paint of the new gates showed faint and ghostly in the darkness.

The next morning he felt ill, and would have liked to stay away from meeting; yet that, again, would seem cowardice. He put down his cup, seized with a sudden fear that some one might be inspired to pray in his behalf. A sweat stood out on him, and he gulped his tea blindly. Then reason came back. They might do it if he were away, but far less likely if he were there. They wouldn't have the brass, he thought, with a gleam of his old spirit. So he went off with his grandson trotting at his side, and sat and knelt with throbbing head, his fears ebbing from him as the service wore on to its end.

He went to bed early that night, to be in readiness for the morrow. The alarum was left permanently set now: its tinkle, feeble in the daylight, sounded every afternoon, half comforting, half worrying him. The passing of the trains was getting on his nerves. He dared scarcely let himself go off to sleep now. Suppose the alarum went wrong, did not work? It had failed once, many years before, but without evil consequence. He had cured it by putting it in the big vat of paraffin oil from which the lamps were filled. There it had lain for three weeks, till the supply ran out, and had been rescued in perfect order, but with a face the colour of

brown paper; and it had behaved magnificently ever since. (Sam, incidentally, had caused much annoyance by his invariable recommendation of this treatment for all the deranged clocks in the neighbourhood.) Well, it had answered for his own; why not? The clock had kept time ever since. But suppose it should fail again? It was old: clocks wore out. He sat up in his bed, and listened to its strong tick-tock on the chest of drawers. That was all right. He lay down again, slept perhaps a little, and woke with a start. Was it fancy, or did the ticking sound weaker? Ah—it seemed to falter then. And so on, and so on, up and down, like a head bobbing on the sea of consciousness, now under, now up again.

In the small hours he leaped and listened, trembling. No; all was still. He had dreamed his old dream again.

After that he could not sleep, nor even stop trembling. He lay flat on his back, gripped the bedclothes, and jammed his feet against the end of the bed in his efforts at control, but his shaking only stopped when his muscles ached from the tension, and he lay sorely tired, his eyes burning in their sockets, wishing for day.

When the alarum did go off it woke him with a shock: he must have just dropped off. He lay a minute, and almost went to sleep again. Frightened, he dressed unsteadily, yawning and blinking, and stood in the ground frame hut, when the train went through, a sick old man.

The new gates were finished. Neighbours, coming to look at them, were kind. Why, they declared, it was a good thing he had let the train go through the old ones. Company would have had to replace them soon, anyway. He had only speeded 'em up a bit. And the new Sam listened almost wistfully, with a smile, to the nonsense which he would so fiercely have rebuked ten days before.

'Have improved old Sam no end, that there accident have,' was the local verdict. 'Much more 'uman it have made en.'

'Aha. Nothin' like misfortuin' to bring a man in line with his fella bein's.'

'Or a 'oman, too.'

'O' course, Joe. I meant a 'uman, not only a male man.'

'Aw.'

But Sam was losing in vitality what he gained in gentleness of heart. The nights, which had been brief intervals of unbroken sleep, were now long shivering ages, broken by hideous dreams. Gigantic engines shrieked along the line: he would run to open the gates, but always fail. Sometimes the lighted train, with a rending as of the crack of doom, would rush grinning by; at other times it would bear down upon him as he struggled with the gates—be on top of him—the crash would be all about him—and he would wake with shut quivering eyelids, convinced that he was dead, and become wearily conscious of his body still whole and aching on the bed. Soon he came to pray that he might not awaken, but that the dream-train might finish all.

His thin face grew thinner, and yellow; his eyes were sunken in his head, their red rims redder than ever; his hand shook as he hung up the lamp upon each gate, and he became gentle and weary, like a sick dog. For the first time in many, many years, he missed Ann. She would have looked after him. On the few occasions when he was ill in her lifetime, he had been a crotchety invalid, and she gentle, patient, and firm, laughing and soothing him out of his tantrums. 'Twould be easier for her now. And then he remembered that, if she were alive, she would be old like himself, and not the girl of those days. . . .

Memories, sights and sounds and touches forgotten, were coming back to him. A white comb and thick, dark hair. A warmth at night, and murmured words. He smiled through his pain in the darkness, and felt something of the sunshine of long buried days. Then pain conquered: he was alone.

'Ann,' he whispered. Then, louder: 'Ann.'

He coughed, and fell asleep. When the alarm woke him, after several hours, he felt very tired, but happier, as if something more than sleep had made the hours good. That was Friday morning. He coughed a lot in the afternoon, and the next night his legs would not carry him to the village for his visit to the inn.

On Sunday he had a pain in his chest and felt light-headed; and the next morning, when he awoke in fearful pain, it was

broad day, and there were people in the room. A sudden dread stabbed him; he tried to struggle up, but could not speak.

'It's all right,' the doctor told him quickly, 'the gates were opened all right. No harm done.'

Sam sank back. Then a slow question formed between his puzzled eyes. His lips shaped it painfully.

'Who?'

'The boy—your grandson. He couldn't waken you, so he did it himself, and sent word down for me. A rare good boy, that.'

A blank: afternoon light. The evening star shining very clearly in at the open window: open much wider than usual. The doctor had had the window-sash taken right out. A large fire roared in the grate. Shadows leaped on the wall . . . sometimes they were friendly, sometimes terrible, like engines rushing down on him. . . . A poultice—on his back. Ah—h.

He was young again. He and Ann wandered by the seashore, and picked up shells. She had bare feet. They came into a little corner of the rocks, and he kissed her. She laughed happily, and they walked slowly along, his arm around her waist. They talked a lot. He tried to remember what they said, to tell the nurse. It was a wonderful plan they had made, but he could not remember any of it.

On Wednesday morning a letter came from the company. They had deliberated upon his case, and, serious though his breach of duty had been, in consideration of his otherwise unblemished record they had decided to continue him in his post without fine or prejudice to his pension.

Neighbours made several attempts to read Sam this document, but they could not be sure whether he understood it. He seemed happy, and whispered to himself from time to time; but it was not clear if he knew where he was, or heard what was said to him.

'He must have took it in; he seems so happy, like,' whispered his daughter-in-law.

''Twould ha' broke his heart if company had gived en the sack, or retired en.'

'Doctor don't think he've heard a word not since early dawn.'

So the question remained unsolved, and Sam died at about five o'clock that afternoon. Neighbours talked far into the night, searching out the justice and the meaning of it all: whether, if such an accident had happened earlier in his life, it would have softened him, without proving mortal. Just as he had become human and fit for society, he had been taken from it. They wondered what difference it would have made had his wife lived, and asked each other many such questions. They felt little personal grief, only a pleasant warmth of sorrow; they wished they could have shown some especial kindness to the old man, and they felt aware of life's strangeness and mystery.

The low hum of their voices sounded outside the house. The orange light in the parlour window showed brighter than usual, and occasionally a head could be seen moving across the blind. A man on a horse passed down the road, and wondered idly at the sound of voices. It was bright moonlight; the metals gleamed, and the new gates showed very white and clear.

VII

THE GURNET

CRAWLING along with the two fins beneath his gills, the gurnet browsed uncertainly over the sand. The sunlight, wavering down through twenty feet of water in daft green pulsations, lit him up clearly and made him look his best. He needed it, for ordinarily he was one of the ugliest fish in the sea. His head was villainous. Many times too big for him, with its long, sloping snout, low forehead, and eyes set to look upwards, it was hideous enough even before he opened his vast mouth. From it his body tapered swiftly to a mere whip of a tail; yet his colouring and the wide stretch of his fins went a long way to redeem him. White underneath, he was beautifully speckled with brown and green all over his back and sides. From his gills to his tail ran a silver

median line, upon which was a row of light red spots; and the same colour tipped the high spiked fins upon his back, which were so well placed as to balance the figure thus oddly begun. As he felt his way along, filling his mouth with sand and spitting it out again, his ridiculous long upper lip suggested a caricature of humanity, and gave him an air of abstraction which much belied his purpose.

Actually, he was trying to catch the little crabs that burrow bottom downwards into the sand and make themselves invisible. They liked each other's company, those little crabs, and if he found one he would very likely find a dozen; but he had struck a blank patch. This was not his only way of getting a living by any means: he was one of the most savage and determined of fighting fish: but it was all he could think of for the moment.

A shadow passed above him and wagged enormously down the leaping green rays. He cowered with a sort of reflex action, for he knew instinctively that it could not get at him. It moved rapidly away, and he forgot it. Another mouthful, and another, and another. All empty. Then suddenly those eyes in the top of his head caught sight of something that looked much more worth while—a flash of silver, high up near the surface. One powerful stroke of his tail, leaving a little cloud of disturbed sand, and he was speeding after it.

Up, up, into the shimmering, dazzling green. The flashing thing swam fast, but he could go faster. Calculating his attack perfectly, he rose underneath and just behind it, shot forward, and seized it in his jaws.

Then something struck the inside of his mouth and he was pulled irresistibly forward. Too much surprised to struggle, he tried vainly to open his mouth and let the object go, but it held him by both jaws; and suddenly the dead, soulless pull gave place to one that every muscle in him at once recognized—the live, variable tugging of an enemy.

Then the gurnet awoke, like the fighter he was, and pulled his hardest. He was matched against a pitiless strength, but he astonished it, jerking, swerving, straining his uttermost to shake the accursed captive from his jaws. For a moment or two the strain eased; had he known it, he was threatening to

foul another line from the boat, and it was being hurriedly pulled out of his way. Rolling his eye, he could just see the bright body of his supposed prey flashing derisively against his nose. Then the strain began again, and the dark shadow which had passed overhead slid clumsily to meet him, growing bigger and blacker, till it filled his sky. With a last gallant effort he dived for the sandbank whence he had come.

‘Damn it all, he’s gone under the boat.’

‘You should have kept the strain on him all the time.’

‘So I would, if you’d kept your —— line out of the light.’

A third voice, conciliatory.

‘What is he—a gurnet?’

‘Can’t see. Here, come up, you brute. Yes, by Jove, and a big one too.’

The gurnet splashed sharply on the surface, and was swung clear into the boat. Striking the wooden bottom, he raised his spines and arched himself into a rigid semicircle. A hand approached warily, whereupon he rolled, quick as a flash, upon his belly, and with blunt, purposeful writhes made speed to get away. Because of his upright position the movement was far more recognizable as an attempt to swim than the flappings of other fish.

‘Look out, he’ll tangle the line. Here, let me get my boot on him. Mind his spines.’

‘Sharp, eh?’

‘And poisonous. Sling him across.’

The strain attacked his mouth again, jerking him once more on his side, and a heavy boot pinned him against the woodwork.

‘There, that’s better. Hear him talk?’

A queer croaking noise came from the gurnet, so wooden and dispassionate that it could hardly be a voice of distress. Yet distress it was—the first protest of his gills against the overwhelming pressure of air.

‘Lord, he’s well hooked. No fear of this chap getting off.’

There followed a period of tearing and jaggling at his mouth. The gurnet perforce lay still, the end of his tail a rigid curve, his long lips cracking in tough resistance. At last the spinner was torn free, and the imprisoning boot

lifted: he croaked harshly, and once more began crawling upon his fins.

There was no question of breaking his neck, he was too strong and dangerous, but his captors did their best to put him out of pain. A blow on the back of his head did not kill him, but it left him quiet, and combined with his upright position to give a fictitious dignity to his end. Such movements as he could make after it seemed weary and resigned. Instead of the fighting death he would have made if left alone, his quiet and his melancholy, half-human face filled at least one beholder with strange emotions. Amongst the other fish in the boat, lying motionless on their sides or shivering in the last ecstasy of death, the gurnet remained propped upon his fins, his great head upreared like a cliff. Throughout the dull choking dream in which his life ended he did nothing to tarnish the gallant fight he had made, or the purposeful movements that contrasted so strangely with the panic-stricken floppings of the rest. He made no fuss. Motionless, save for an occasional slow gasp of his gills, his spines still gallantly erect, his side fins outspread, he was a figure not without dignity—an aristocrat, so it seemed, even among all the mackerel, greyhounds of the sea.

But he could not last long. His colours darkened, and a dull film came over his gleaming sides. The spines on his back began to droop. His gills opened slowly to their full extent, choked, held a few seconds, then drew in; and with that movement the whole of his head seemed to shrink, and to grow thinner, meaner, more forlorn. Another minute, and his spines were flat. Then, with the last message from his sunken brain, the last dim effort to escape, it fell to the savage, clumsy fish to make a gesture as frail and exquisite as any the world could show. The spread fins at his side, borne delicately as a lady's fan, executed their fluttering slow stroke and came each to rest against his side. For perhaps a minute more he remained upright. Then a fresh captive took attention from him: and when next his captors looked at him, the gurnet had rolled over on his side, defeated.

VIII

THE SEAL

JUST before six the rain lifted at last, and Rosamond started off to the shore by herself. George, who had been loud in his outbursts at its continuance, had given up hope after tea and sat down to write some letters. There had been all day in which to write them, but he would not begin; he kept pacing up and down the little farmhouse sitting-room and watching the sky. Now, characteristically, he would not come out till they were finished. He liked company while he bathed, so Rosamond was going down to the shore to wait for him, in case he got the letters done in time.

She crossed the road, climbed a low fence, every wire of which was bright with raindrops, and went slowly along the path through the broom. Every now and then she brushed against a branch which sent a delightful shower down her bare legs. It was all very quiet. A rabbit, hopping up the bank in front of her, left a little track like smoke on the silver grass. Even the burn below her, running dark and passionately full, made hardly a sound.

After the room at the farm, which on a wet day was dank and stuffy by turns, and which on any day was too small to contain a large fretful man, Rosamond's sense of escape was complete. She would have liked a walk in the rain by herself, all along the rocks, and up by the headland; but George wanted her company when he went out, and, if the weather had cleared while she was away on her own, he would have spent the evening trying not to have a grievance: a generous effort, so patent, and so unsuccessful, that Rosamond could not steady herself even by concentrating upon the fairmindedness which made it. But this was peace. She was glad now that she had not come out before.

There was a sound across the burn. Old Mrs. McLean flung open her door and hobbled out to feed her chickens. Her quavering call came through the stillness. Rosamond waved, but could not be sure that the old lady saw her.

This was Rosamond's own country. She had spent every summer here since she could remember, and everything had always been the same. Mrs. McLean's door had always made the same noise, and when she called her dog home in the evening it was always with the same call, for each dog had the same name, although this was the third Darach Rosamond had known. Last summer, on their honeymoon, she and George had only been able to manage a bare ten days here, but George had sworn the loss should be made good, and cheerfully dedicated the whole of the next holiday to the farm. That was one of the nicest things about George; he did want one to be happy. Still, he enjoyed the place too, tremendously, so that Rosamond need not reproach herself.

The broom stopped short, and she came out upon the sand. All sorts of flowers grew upon it until the final slope of the sandhills, where only the reeds could live. Beyond was the beach. The thick carpeting of moss felt delightful to her bare feet—a quite different feeling from the grass.

It was very necessary to go out by herself now and then, for since she married the place seemed somehow different. Its immediate beauties were obvious, but there had always been a great deal more for her than the lights and colours which called forth George's 'By Jove's' and 'I say, Rosamond's!' George's personality was so loud—well, so vigorous—that one often needed a good while alone to let his echoes die away. It was lovely to have him interested in what one did, and he took a real, intelligent interest; yet the result was rather like his trick of taking up and continuing, in a hearty baritone, the tune she was quietly humming to herself as she did the housework.

Almost imperceptibly, the rain started again.

Rosamond reached the sandhills, turned to her right, and went through the gap beside the burn. She loved the sudden sight of the islands one had this way, and, even though to-day they would probably be invisible, she did not like breaking the pure snowy face of the sandhills with great sliding foot-marks.

The smaller islands were lost, but a dark strip of Skye showed beneath a layer of woolly cloud. The sea was flat, and pale as a sheet. There was not even a bird on the

beach; and the only sound was the indefinable whisper of soft rain falling upon sand.

Rosamond went very slowly down to the sea's edge, scooped a dry place—it was surprising, even after a day's rain, how soon one reached dry sand—and sat down, spreading her mackintosh about her like a tent. The rain was quickening: it began to patter audibly on the mackintosh, to collect in little gleaming rivulets and run down jerkily into the sand. All was still and intimate. She looked slowly around, and then again at the rivulets. While an hour like this was possible, she could be happy.

Some instinct made her look at the sea. At first there was nothing, and then a dark object broke the surface. It looked like the float for a lobster-pot: then it moved, and she saw that it was a seal. It was looking at her. She did not stir.

For a moment the head moved indecisively. Doubtless the seal could not make her out. Then, with a snort which carried perfectly on the still water, it dived again.

'Oh,' breathed Rosamond, heart-broken, 'don't go away,' and it seemed that her own country was rejecting her if the seal could not trust her not to wish him harm. She scanned the surface in an agony, and saw at last an unmistakable dark shadow, clear over the white sand: and there he was again, with a sort of oiled suddenness, away to the right, but definitely nearer, staring at her. Without moving, Rosamond began to whistle, in low, clear, liquid notes, like the rain. The dark head became absolutely motionless. He was listening. Then she put into the notes her soul, her happy summers, all her childhood, flowing out across the water to him in one of the island tunes she had loved ever since she could tell one note from another. She whistled to her past years, to all that had meant happiness; she called to her own country to recognize her, and take her back to it again. Her soul and breath were one, and even in the uttermost of her appeal she had a sense of ecstasy, as of an artist consummating his vision alone, with none to praise him.

Then, slowly and softly, the big seal swam towards her, his dark head sleek on the water, his wondering eyes fixed upon her. Tears started to Rosamond's eyes.

'Oh, bless you,' she breathed, 'bless you, you darling.'

When he was quite near, she began to sing to him, in a low voice, clear as her whistle, but not so steady. She sang him the 'Seal Croon,' and the 'Seagull of the Land Under Waves,' and all the time the great nursery creature stared at her with soft eyes, in attention and vague delight. When she stopped, he blew, and made a commotion in the water, till she began again. It should have lasted for ever.

He stirred. Something had alarmed him; and, even as she realized this, she heard a hearty voice behind her, and George came charging headlong over the sandhills, bringing down avalanches with each leap.

'Dr—ink to me o—o—nly—'

The seal gave him a long look, then it looked back at Rosamond, and without a reproach it was gone, silently, a black shadow, detached from land and sea.

'By Jove!' bellowed George excitedly, 'there goes a seal. Look, Rosamond—see him? There he goes—there! By Jove, a whopper!'

He plunged up, panting, to where she sat.

'I'd no idea they came in so close,' he cried. 'Did you see him?'

'Yes,' said Rosamond.

IX

'INDIAN RED'

THE air was full of the bleating of sheep, the cries of men and boys, and the shrill yapping of the dogs. Clouds of dust rose continually, and the setting sun showed through them in a haze of gold.

There had been a fair at Dousland, and now the sheep were being entrained. The technique of this was simple: they were hustled out, about a hundred at a time, from a field adjoining the main road, and dogs drove them past the inn towards the station. Here a line of men and boys, armed with sticks, barred the road, leaving the sheep no escape but

the narrow incline that led up to the platform. At the foot of this incline, on either side, two men experienced in the process sweated, shoved, and swore, somehow hustling the breathless beasts along their path, and saving them from injury against the palings as they pressed madly forward.

Several onlookers, shading their eyes against the sun, had come out from the inn and stood watching. Suddenly a few determined beasts swerved back past the dogs, and scampered up the road. One of the dogs, a thin active animal, shot after them like an arrow and rounded up the runaways, snapping viciously at their flanks. They turned in a scurry and a whirl of dust, which sent the onlookers coughing back into the cool of the bar.

Here they were soon joined by an old man, dusty, hot, and vexed. He sat down on a bench, mopped his brow with a huge yellow handkerchief, and called querulously for ale.

The barman hastily drew it, and handed it to the ancient, who drained it off with a speed that showed much practice. Thereupon, refreshed, he looked about him upon the company, whose eyes since his entrance had rested on him with some amusement. There were a couple of tourists; an elderly farmer; three youths from the village, one recently enlisted, and making his first appearance in uniform; and two labourers from Burrator.

The old man blinked over at the farmer, and saluted him. 'Evenin', Sam,' he observed, in a high, quavering voice. 'I be that put about, I didn't see 'ee at first.'

'Evenin', Eli,' responded the farmer. "'Tis no wonder, what with all the dust they'm kickin' up.'

'Evenin', Mr. Poad,' said the recruit loudly from the window.

The ancient acknowledged the greeting somewhat stiffly. 'So you'm back again,' he said, eyeing the youth without enthusiasm.

'You bet. Back again, like a bad penny, I be.'

The old man seemed about to reply, but thought better of it. His eye roamed towards the strangers.

'Interferin' toad, that there p'liceman,' he said presently, to no one in particular. 'Proper know-all; comes hinedering

of folks what have dood the job all their lives, a-tellin' of 'em how to do it.'

The youths in the window growled assent. Apparently on this point they and the ancient were at one.

'Bit too big for his boots, like,' observed one of the labourers. 'Noo brooms sweeps clean, as the sayin' is. But I seem he'll settle down, bimbye.'

'Nosey Parker, that's what 'e is,' said one of the youths.

'One of they sheep, just now,' continued the old man, 'he turned back past the dog, and runned up over the hedge. I sent the dog vore to en, and the sheep jumped down, and falled 'pon his knees. Didn't hurt en 'tall, 'cos he runned back not so much as limping. But he were pankin' a bit, you know, out o' breath like. P'liceman, he says to me: "You be careful," he says, "or you'll have the Soci'ty for Prevention of Croolty to Animals 'pon your track." "Well," I says to en, "I didn't ask the sheep to go up over the hedge, did I? He goed up there to please hisself, and he come back here to please me."'

'You had en there,' said the farmer.

'Ees': the old man looked round with pleasure on the company. 'I had en there. I couldn't say no fairer than that to en, could I?'

'No, indeed,' said the elder of the tourists. 'Won't you have something with us? And you, gentlemen? It's a dry day, and we've a lot of dust to wash down.'

There was a murmur of grateful assent, led off by the 'Thankee, I don't mind if I do,' of the ancient, and the barman was busy for a minute.

'Puts me in mind,' said the old man, gazing with gratification upon the pint just placed before him, 'of P.C. Trellacott—this here young fella do. Do 'ee mind who I mean, Sam?'

'Trellacott? Aw yes,' replied the farmer. 'I minds en well.'

'Who was he?' The tourists leaned forward.

'He was just such another as this here one be,' replied the old man. 'Cock o' the dunghill, very owdacious, and always lookin' round for some one to be breakin' the law. 'Tis peaceable parts, hereabouts, and I reckon there wasn't much

scope for en, as the saying is. Still 'twas wonnerful what a deal of wrong-doin' he manage' to rake out, in a small way, like. If 'twasn't poachin'—this with a severe glance towards the window—'or a tramp stealin' mangolds out of a field, 'twas short weight in the village, or cattle strayed 'pon the highway.'

The farmer grunted vigorously. 'Yes,' he said, 'and the wonder to some was, how the gates come un'apsed to let 'em out.'

'Oh, come,' said one of the tourists mildly. 'You don't mean the policeman let them out himself?'

The old man waved a deprecating hand. 'Well,' he remarked judicially, 'I shouldn't go for to say it. Give a dog a bad name, as the saying is—you know, gentlemen. Once the village had their knife into the toad, there was nothing they wouldn't credit to en. But this much I will say: if Trellacott seed a gate 'pon the swing, or 'apsed up onsecure, he'd bide there hours till the first bullick should put 'ees foot upon the road, and off with en to summons the owner.'

'Howsoever, he wasn't here long: though before he goed I reckon he had enough excitement to last en he's livetime.'

The old man paused, and took a steady pull. 'A-aa-h,' he observed, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, 'that's better. Well, as I was tellin' 'ee, this here Trellacott were always 'pon the lookout for wrongdoin': and after a bit it comes to en to turn his eye to the motor-cars. Us has good clear roads round hereabouts, and some of these fellas, when they sees all clear ahead of 'em, lets out a bit 'pon times.

'So Trellacott went off and stood hisself up by the Rock to Yelverton, and checkied off all the motors 'pon his stop-watch, to see if they was breakin' the limit or no. Howsomebe, the fellas could see en some way off, for 'tis bare like up there, and no proper shelter for en to hide hisself, so he didn't catch not very many of 'em.'

'There was one fella he was out to catch special, though, and that was young George Arscott. George Arscott lived up to Two Bridges, and he had one of these here motor-bicycles, what you calls a Injun Red.'

'Red Injun, you means, Mr. Poad,' said one of the young men in the window.

The old man eyed him severely, and took another drink. 'Red Injun or Injun Red, don't make no odds,' he said firmly.

'No. We understand. Please go on,' begged the tourist. 'Another—won't you allow me——?'

'Thankee, I'm sure. Well, beas'twill, young George Arscott lived out to Two Bridges with his old mother. In they days, if you wanted your letters Sunday mornin', you was force' to come into Yelverton and get 'em yourself, 'cos there wasn't no delivery. Well, that hour of the mornin'—before nine o'clock, it had to be—there wasn't nobody about and the roads was bare for miles: so George used to hop 'pon he's Injun Red, and come pakin' across the moors at the most tree-menjis pace, down into Yelverton for he's letters. Each Sunday he used to try and go quicker than what he had went the time before, and it got to be a standin' joke hereabouts to bet George so much he wouldn't cut a minute off he's time.

'Well, o'course 'twasn't long before this came to the long ears o' P.C. Trellacott. So nex' time he sees Sir Luke, that was Lord of the Manor and Chief Magistrate in these parts, he says to en that 'tis a public scandal how George Arscott breaks the law, and the whole village aids and abets en, same purpose.

"'Tis no good tellin' to me, Trellacott," says Sir Luke. (He wasn't no great friend to Trellacott, neither, and he'd had to slow up himself more than once for Trellacott and he's stop-watch.) "'Tis no good tellin' to me," he says. "Us can't do anything on hearsight," he says. "I be powerless, without you catches en in *fragrant delicto*."

'In what?' queried the farmer, with puzzled forehead.

'*Fragrant delicto*. Red 'anded, like,' explained the old man. "'If you brings such a case to my notice, I shall act upon it, of course. Good-day, Trellacott.'" And Sir Luke drives off.

'Well, after that, o' course, Trellacott had no peace of mind until he schemed out how to catch George Arscott in *fragrant delicto*. He thought out he's plan at last, and broke

it to old Tudgers, p'lice constable down to Horrabridge, 'cos he wasn't able to carr' it out single-'anded.

'Tudgers didn't want to have nort to do with it, first of all. You knows what a easy-going old toad he was. "What's the sense?" he says. "There isn't no danger, that time o' morning: there isn't nobody 'pon the roads. Of a Sunday, too."

'But Trellacott keeps on to en, how important 'tis to see the law is kep', and all that sort, that, to last, Tudgers agrees with en for peace and quiet sake. "But mind," he says, "you got to go up the road. I ain't goin' no further than Yelverton," he says, "not for nobody."

'This here was Trellacott's plan, to go couple o' mile up the road with he's stop-watch, and note down what time George Arscott should pass en by. Old Tudgers was to bide down to Yelverton, and take the time when George should pass by he. Then they should compare the two times together afterwards, and see how long George had took to cover the distance. They could work out, from that, how fast he was goin'—see?—and tell whether or no he was breakin' the limit. Trellacott reckoned 'twas a artful plan, too: 'cos even if George seed en, and slowed down to pass en, he would sure to let out so soon as he was out of sight: and it wouldn't matter then whether he seed Tudgers or no.

'But he reckoned without George Arscott. A artfuller toad than George never trod 'pon a shoe. As it happens, he wasn't on good terms with Trellacott, to start with, neither. He was courtin' a maid down to Walkhampton, was George. Joan, her first name was, a most onusual name round these parts, where most of the maids is called Gladys or Vi'let or Ivy or some such. And one night, when they was sittin' in the hedge, behavin' intimate, Trellacott turned he's lantern on to 'em. Said he was lookin' for a tramp, he did, what had been stealin' fowls out of the runs hereabouts; but neither one wouldn't believe but what he done it o' purpose.

'Well, Trellacott tramped up his two miles, and a bit more, and tooked his stand up top Peak Hill, where he reckoned George was most likely to let her rip. And he hadn't long to wait neither, for soon he hears, far off over the moors, George Arscott's horn. I should have told 'ee,

George had a most wonnerful horn on he's Injun Red. 'Twasn't one of these hootin', scritch'in' kind; but it gived out a musical note, like a trumpet. Just like music, 'twas. One of the best-known familiar sounds around these parts, was George Arscott's horn. Well, as I say, he heard the horn, and soon after that a hummin' sound, and then he sees George hisself, coming along to a most tree-menjis rate.

'But, as luck would have it, George seed he. Ah, he was a artful toad, was George. 'Stead of slowin' down, he let out for all her was worth, and passes by p'liceman most like a flash o' lightnin'.

"Now, me fine fella," says Trellacott, coming out after George was out of sight—and that was purty soon, I can tell 'ee—"I've a got 'ee, for sure."

'But he hadn't, my dears. No-dear-no.' The old man paused, and chuckled.

'So soon as he was well down the road out o' sight,' he resumed, 'George slowed down, and comed to a pause. In they days there use to be a little wood half-ways up the road to Lowery, where now 'tis buildin' sites. When he come so far, George got off, and sat down by the roadside for a bit. He bide there 'bout of twenty minutes, smokin' he's pipe, and then off with en again, for fear Trellacott should come to en and see he's little game. Way-da-go full speed ahead, down through Dousland here, as if the devil was after en, and come up on the downs to Yelverton 'fore you could turn in your bed.

'He looked 'fore, and there, sure enough, was old Tudgers stood to the roadside. Then George proper gived the reins to he's Injun Red, and streaked pakin' past old Tudgers to the most owdacious speed ever witnessed 'pon top the downs.

"Aw," thinks Tudgers, when he'd finished brushin' the dust out of he's eyes and ear 'oles, "us have ketched the pore fella for certain now, breakin' the limit something dreadful."

'Well, souls, what Trellacott said to Tudgers when they compared notes like and found George had took pretty near a half-hour to travel two miles, I'll leave 'ee to 'magine for yerselves. 'Tis certain he forgot hisself, for Tudgers was niffed with en for days to come, and told en next time he could ketch the fella hisself, begad.

"'Twas all about the place in no time, how George Arscott had bested Trellacott, and the pore man was near drove out of he's mind by the ree-marks what folks made in he's hearing. The very nex' Sunday after that, George was walkin' down the road with Joan 'pon he's arm, and who should meet with 'em but Trellacott.

"Aw, constable," says George, "could you be so good as to tell us the time?"

'Trellacott gnashed he's teeth—for one thing, it always riled en for George to call en constable, like what the gentry did; but he tooked out he's watch and answered civil enough.

"Thank you," says George, and then he takes out he's own watch. "Yes, that's what I makes it, within a minute. I reckon your watch be keepin' better time than what he was las' Sunday, constable."

'And with the same they walks on, leavin' pore Trellacott so red's a beetroot with the rage.

'Well, souls, now we comes to the queerest part o' the tale. Nex' Sunday mornin' after that, Trellacott was seed very early ridin' he's push-bike up the Princetown Road; and, just 'bout o' church time, us heard that George Arscott had falled off he's Injun Red up to Double Waters and broked he's neck.'

The old man looked round, enjoying the sensation caused by his words.

'Trellacott's story to the inquest was that George was comin' along too fast, as usual, and he's front wheel ketched up in some loose stones where they been mendin' the road. The Injun Red dood half a dozen sommerzauts, and George was killed 'pon the spot that instant minute.

'There was no call to doubt what Trellacott said, but naturally they asked en what he was a doin' of up to Double Waters that time o' mornin', and he was force' to admit he'd went up there and hid hisself in hopes of catchin' George Arscott a-breakin' of the limit. That there turned feelin's against en, I needn't tell 'ee, and after the inquest was over the folks booded to en in the roadway.

'Joan—George's sweetheart, what I've told 'ee of—her was like a mazed soul. For a couple o' days her wouldn't speak. Her was so white's a sheet, and her gert eyes glowed

like if they was goin' to fall out of her head. When her comed round a bit like, nothing wouldn't persuade her that Trellacott wasn't someways responsible for George's death; and as the village had a dislike to the man, there wasn't wantin' many to say it with her. 'Course they didn't make no accusation, definite like, but shooked their heads and said there was some knowed more about the affair than what come out.

'Bout o' three weeks after, George Arscott's old mother was bein' drived into Tavistock for market, when by misfortune her comed upon Trellacott to the cross-roads. So soon as her drawed abreast of en, her stood up in the cart, pore old 'ooman, and cursed en to the top of her voice for the man what killed her son. Drove en to his death, her said.

'I'll say this for Trellacott, he didn't take on, like some might have; he seed the poor old soul was out of herself, like, and he tooked no notice. There was some what put down even that there to a bad motive, and said 'twas for he's guilt sake he dassent open he's mouth; but there's always folks to miscall whatever a body may do.

'Well, things quieted down a bit after this, and Trellacott, he must have begunned to think it had blowed over. Folks didn't speak to en, but then they didn't call after en no more: and that was so much to the good, I reckon. And then something happened what put the finishin' touch to all.

'One night, latish, when he was sittin' in he's front room, in he's shirt-sleeves, readin', and just seeming to hisself 'twas time to go up bed, he suddenly hears a sound what made en go goose all down he's back. He listens, and soon there 'tis again, soft and muffledy, but no mistakin' it, the soundin' of George Arscott's horn. And, while he sat there sweatin', it goes a third time, outside the window.

'Trellacott wasn't no coward. He gets up, opens he's door, and takes a few steps out into the garden. "Who's there?" he says, with a bit of a shake to he's voice: but nobody answers. Then he tooked up heart, and went another few steps: and all of a suddent he seen what brought en up with a round turn.

'Down to the end of the lil' garden, by the currant bushes, was a ghostly form stood up. 'Twas dressed in white, seem-

so, and he couldn't see its face proper: but there was a sort of greeny shine over it, clear enough for en to make out George Arscott's cap and goggles.

'It p'inted with its finger to en, and tooked a step forwards, lookin' most fearful to behold. I tell 'ee, souls, 'twas a ghost to frighten a body out o' their senses; and all would have went well if only Trellacott had behaved accordin' to; scritch'd for his life, I mean, and run back into house. 'Stead o' that, he stoopied down, picked up a half-a-brick, heaved it at the ghost, and knocked en flat.

'He runned forward, striked a match, and bent down over the ghost, shelterin' the light in he's hand. 'Twas Joan. Her couldn't speak, for the brick had hit her 'pon the breast, but her great black eyes looked up dauntless to en, full of hatred and deefiance.

'Well, that was the finishin' touch, as you might say. After that, he had to go. You couldn't really blame en, 'cos, after all, how was he to know who 'twas? But most folk believed he knowed very well who 'twas; and when 'tis believed against a man that he've rose his hand to a woman like that, he's better out of the place, specially if he'm a public character like a p'liceman.

'So they moved Trellacott off, and I don't think nobody was sorry to see the back of en. I minds en going away now, white and bitter to the last. I was sorry for the pore toad, mind 'ee, for everybody was against en: but 'twas no place for the likes of he.'

The old man paused, as a frantic outburst of barking arose in the road outside. There was a scuffle of sheep, and the inevitable cloud of dust; and then a line of men and boys followed the sheep down the road. The old man drained the last of his beer, and rose stiffly.

'The last lot, I see,' he observed. 'Well, genelmen, I must be goin'. Thankee, I'm sure. Good night, Sam. Good night.'

'Good night, Eli.'

'Good night, Mr. Poad.'

He passed out of the door, and peered down the road, shading his eyes with his hand. Then, catching sight of some one, he waved his stick and hobbled off in the wake of the sheep.

THE GALLEON

ON a hot summer evening the madman walked up the principal street of the little town. The hour was some twenty minutes before the scheduled departure of the country bus, and a number of men with nothing else to do had gathered to watch. They stood in knots, or aimlessly by themselves. A few leaned against the hot wall of the Bank. They spoke little. There was nothing to do.

The madman strode briskly along in the roadway, about a yard from the kerb. He was a small man, past middle age, with aquiline, almost handsome features: but his expression changed every two seconds, and he had lost several teeth, so that his cheeks were hollow at the sides, and, when he puffed for breath, his moustache and lips shot out in front like an indiarubber trumpet. His face was bright with sweat, and he kept screwing up his eyes and puffing. But it was his get-up, not his face, which first caught one's attention. On the top of his head, at a jaunty angle, rode a corn-coloured straw hat, several times too small, with a club ribbon. He wore the sort of coat in which gentlemen used years ago to attend the races, and, slung over this—the only article of his dress which agreed with another—was a case which had once held field-glasses. He had a high celluloid collar, much too big, and no tie. From his shoulder, on a string, hung several more collars, of various shapes and sizes, a small kettle, a tin picnic-box, and an enamel mug; dangling down his back were a yachting cap, pierced through the peak, and three odd shoes. His legs were covered by a pair of enormous cricket trousers, turned up in baggy rolls half-way up his shin; he wore odd socks, and a pair of fashionable Maiden-head shoes, with the white part—God knows how—still pipe-clayed.

As he advanced up the street, his eyes lit on a big well-dressed gentleman standing beside a Ford car—the guest, maybe, of some gentleman from the country, who had come

in to get his week-end stores. The madman raised his hand, and called a greeting.

'Ah, my dear sir,' he cried, 'a thousand welcomes to you. It's a pleasure to see you again—a pleasure indeed.'

His speech was very difficult to classify. He would often begin in the parody of a refined voice, and tail off into common brogue. Many a dispute there had been as to his origin: some insisting that he was a high-up person brought low by misfortune, others that he had been a waiter, or an artist in humble capacity on the stage, and so picked up his fine accents.

'Good day, sir, good day.' He had almost reached his victim. 'I take the opportunity to mention the weather. You will doubtless wish me to do so. Warm, sir; warm, but seasonable.'

He grabbed suddenly in his pocket, produced a vast yellow handkerchief, and mopped his brow.

'Hot as hell's griddle,' he added in voice number two. When he grinned, you saw with a shock how few teeth he had.

The stranger, who had turned a thick purple, glanced furtively about him.

'Now, you, sir, if I may say so,' continued the madman, flourishing his handkerchief, 'you, sir (if you will *permit* me to say so), represent a class which— No, don't go yet; don't go yet.' He clutched the stranger's sleeve. 'We have much—'

'Get away.' The stranger pulled his arm clear. 'Get away. Let me alone. I don't want anything to say to you.'

And he moved a few paces down the street, disgruntled, brushing his sleeve resentfully.

The madman pondered for a moment, and looked up at the sky. Then he began trying how far he could lean back and look up at the sky without over-balancing. He tried this three or four times, cackling with glee, and stooping each time to replace his hat. The crowd raised a faint, derisive cheer; they were too hot to respond. Then, to the stranger's great relief, his host appeared, full of parcels and apologies, and every one respectfully watched the two drive off. The

crowd grinned sympathetically at the stranger—not that they liked the look of him, but because the incident had given them a right to do so, and to assert their superiority over the madman.

As soon as the car had clattered off, in a whirl of dust, they turned lazily to seek further entertainment. The madman was discovered in earnest argument with an old, beaky, grinning workman. He revolved his head slowly in his earnestness, opening his mouth to speak a long time before the words came.

‘. . . Prince of Wales is all very well,’ he was saying, ‘all very well. *Noblesse oblige*, I admit. But the King is better. I—say—the—King—is—better. I—’

‘Ah, go on now, go on now,’ cried the delighted ancient. The madman, revolving his head with extra solemnity, lost his hat, and by the time he had replaced it the old man had shoved somebody else into his place, and crouched behind him, grinning and winking at the onlookers.

‘But—I—say—the—King—is—better,’ shouted the madman, buttonhoing the deputy, and quite unconscious of change. ‘Would you exalt the father above the son? I mean, naturally, the son above the father? Is not the Father greater than the Son? What says the Holy Book: “For ye also are His witnesses——”’

‘Ah, go to hell!’

The deputy, tiring of the diversion, avoided further controversy by the simple expedient of walking behind the nearest man and coming round on the other side.

‘William Tell,’ said the madman, thoughtfully. ‘William Tell. Hell. William Tell.’

He gave a shrill cackle, and then, checking himself, put his hat carefully on the ground and began to divest himself of his portable goods and his coat. As he was stooping over them, arranging them neatly on the ground, some one gave him a push behind, and he sprawled forward on his face.

The effect was unexpected. He leaped up, and began to caper.

‘Hurroo, boys, hurroo!’ he yelled, flinging his arms high in the air. The crowd clapped their hands and egged him

on, but he stopped as suddenly as he had begun, puffing and shooting out his lips.

'I—am not—of your element,' he announced with dignity, and began putting on his things again. 'When the division is made, and party is separated from party, then we shall know—then we shall know——'

He broke off, searching for one of his things. Grinning to one another, the crowd closed in round him. The good-nature in their faces had given place to a different look, such as one sees in the faces of children surrounding a victim.

'Give me room,' exclaimed the madman suddenly; and he leaped up, flinging out his arms as if he were swimming. Those nearest him backed away quickly, with jeering cries.

'Every school child in Ireland,' vociferated the madman, 'is entitled by law——'

'Who are you shovin'?' cried a man, and gave him a push.

'Get on out of this,' cried another.

'Keep off me feet, you fool,' a third; and they pushed him from one to another, quickly, never letting him regain his balance.

'Every school child—every sch——' gasped the madman, struggling from point to point about the circle. 'Every—every——'

His insane persistence roused their cruelty, and they began to fling him about harder and harder, till he fell sprawling, like a spider. For a moment he crouched on all fours, lowering his head and puffing. Then, with a fresh access of energy, he leaped up again.

'I'll have to prevaricate with you, boys,' he yelled. 'I'll have to prevaricate'; and, winding himself into a complicated knot, he took a run and let fly a wild blow, the swing of which, before it was quite spent, hit a harmless bystander in the mouth: a boy of eighteen or thereabouts, who had taken no part in the sport.

The crowd growled. Here was the excuse for which their hearts lusted.

'Hit 'im back, boy.'

'Fetch him a kick in the guts.'

'Don't take that from his like.'

'Ah, ye old stoat, ye: ye'd go hittin' a boy done you no harm, would ye?'

The boy backed away deprecatingly, his hand to his mouth.

'Ah, no, let him alone. Sure, he didn't hurt me,' he protested.

'Didn't hurt ye!' A big, fat fellow pushed his way forward. There were several pints to go sour in him with the heat. He had a red, weak face, with a two-days' beard and a scabbed cleft in his lower lip. 'He didn't, maybe, but he damn well might have. It's not his fault he didn't, the vicious old——'

He lurched up to the madman, who was muttering and counting on his fingers.

'Look at here,' he growled.

'Don't disturb me, don't disturb me,' cried the madman. 'How often have I to tell you I must positively not be disturbed? It's most important, most important.'

The fat man put out a dirty hand and grabbed him by the chest.

'Listen to me, you old omadhaun,' he said. 'Give over hittin' them that's younger nor yourself, d'ye see, or I'll gi' ye a slog in the gob.'

'Slog in the gob,' repeated the madman. His eyes opened wide and he began to caper. 'Slog in the gob, slog in the gob,' he chanted, screaming with laughter.

This unusual reaction disconcerted the bully altogether. He let go, and backed away, a repulsion from the incomprehensible working in his face.

'Slog in the gob,' yelled the madman; and, to every one's consternation, he rushed up and hit the fat man a ringing clout on the ear. Then he retreated, jumped high, both feet off the ground, and roared with laughter.

But not for long. A powerful blow sent him spinning into the gutter. It was badly timed, or the evening's entertainment would have ceased then and there.

The madman rose at once. He steadied himself, and went through the motions of shooting his cuffs.

'Are any of you gentlemen medical students?' he asked. 'I ask because I have been told lately that there is a great

deal of disaffection amongst the medical students of our hospitals.' He scanned the faces anxiously, but was evidently disappointed. Turning his head back, he looked up at the sky again. 'Disaffected,' he murmured.

The fat man came over to him and gave him a push. He careered fantastically backward into a bystander's arms, and was saved from falling.

'Up the Boers!' he cried. 'Up, Kruger! Up, the Boers!'

And, rushing forward, he made another effort to slap the fat man.

A leaden, evil satisfaction boiled under the fat man's face. Gripping his assailant by the shoulder, he spun him round, and gave him a terrific kick on the behind. This time the madman did not get up at once. He raised himself carefully, and they saw that he was bleeding from the mouth.

'Oh, boys, oh, boys,' he said. 'That was a croosher, and no mistake.'

He grinned to himself, and crawled towards the fat man on his hands and knees. Halting just in front of him, he looked up; an expression of supreme, annihilating contempt came over his face, and he said a single word in a soft voice. Then the fat man kicked him in the body, three times, as hard as he could.

Immediately a sense of guilt seized the crowd. They looked fearfully round, and started to back away.

'Here.'

Two of them quickly stooped over the limp form, and carried it down an alley close by, round a corner, and into an empty yard. A cat rose stiffly, arched her back, and moved a few yards off, looking her disfavour. The bearers propped their burden against a wall, beside a dustbin, and made haste to leave him. A minute later one returned and threw his loose possessions clattering down beside him.

The madman was a sorry sight now, sagging, broken, the stuffing gone out of him, with his bloody chin on his chest and his moustache drooping forlorn, like weed over the edge of a weir. The sun had set some time when he came to himself for a moment, and saw in the sky, past the dark line of the roof and chimneys, a great golden reef of cloud. In his troubled sight it instantly became a galleon, sailing off

gallant and stately across the night-blue waters. He saw it in marvellous detail, mighty as a mountain, tall and soft and whispering, like a tree; and as it drew away he realized that he ought to be on board, and saw his soul running along after it and calling, like a little celestial newsboy with the latest news from earth, running like mad over the firm sea and gradually catching up. Taller and taller it grew, and swayed above him, till they opened a port, high, high up, and a man with a black beard swung out a golden rope ladder to take him in.

Figures were bending over him, with lanterns and a stretcher. He roused his spent forces to confront them.

‘Up, the Boers!’ he whispered. ‘Up, the Boers!’

XI

THE BIG MAN

TED and Freda rode in the motor diligence up the steep, winding road from Reichenau to Waldhaus, too sleepily happy to speak. The night journey had tired them, but breakfast at Basle (prescribed by Freda’s cousin Clarence, who had crossed three times) went a long way to freshen them up, and the run by the Lake of Zurich seemed a delight that would never end. Their luggage, duly registered, arrived with them at Reichenau: and they waited shyly, among a little knot of strangers, till the diligence came, and a formidable official bustled up and read out the names of the passengers who had booked seats.

‘Sut-ton: *zwei*,’ he shouted, the very first name on his list: whereupon Ted and Freda seized their hand-luggage and climbed up, the good-natured crowd staring and making room for them to pass. Ever since, they had sat close together, Freda’s knee pressed against Ted’s, and her hand surreptitiously holding his under the seat. They might well have passed for a honeymoon couple: but the Swiss and Germans

who came to Waldhaus had long since given up trying to guess anything about English people.

The days that followed were full of delights. Ted had been gloomy about the prospect of a Continental breakfast, but, after the first day, he seemed actually to like it. Indeed, how could he fail to like it, brought to their bedroom as it was by a neat, daintily-stepping chambermaid, who smiled almost maternally upon them, put down the tray, said '*Bit-te,*' and then, as she closed the door: '*Bon appétit!*' Ted and Freda would smile at one another, like children, and enjoy their coffee and rolls and marvellous butter, looking out of the open window into the thick woods, all fresh and dewy in the morning.

And then, when one had dressed, and took a stroll down the street—the mighty Flimserstein! That great magnificent wall of mountain, literally overhanging the village, so near and huge that it would be terrifying, but for its soft, kindly colours, and its general air of sleepiness in the morning light. Ted would stare up, for minutes together, with puckered eyes. He had never seen anything like the Flimserstein. Each morning it took away his breath, with the same magnificent, calm assertion of size and might.

Next, they would have to plan the day: whether to go down to Cauma See and bathe: to walk in the woods: to climb up through them to Runca, by long, mossy paths patched with sunlight, between the boulders and tall trees: or divide the day between all these and other pursuits. They were wonderfully happy, and the days stretched ahead of them. They had only a fortnight really, but the present was so many-coloured that they did not yet have to think of any other life.

They had been married five years. Ted was thirty-three, small, clean-shaven, fair, and beginning to go bald; Freda was seven years younger. She was the daughter of a small builder of Evangelical views, who lived in Surbiton. Her upbringing need not have been as narrow as it was, for the builder, though strict, was no bigot: but Freda's was an affectionate nature, and she would readily have submitted to a far narrower régime. She was allowed to go to local

socials and dances, where she met plenty of young men, but they made no impression upon her. She was pretty, in an unobtrusive sort of way, and she had an abundance of soft, fair hair: yet there somehow clung about her a slight air of old-fashionedness, which chilled the young men, and she was just as glad that they were chilled. Ted was the only man who had come into her life, and, by great good fortune, he was the right one.

She was attracted from the first, for there was something very likeable about Ted, with his blue eyes, the little cleft in his chin, and his air of quiet and unpretentious seriousness. She watched him, at supper one Sunday, talking to her father, and thought what a nice man he was. He came oftener, and one day, she caught herself wanting to laugh at him and tease him—even to rumple his hair. Shocked at her own daring, but unable to stop, she did presently make a chaffing remark or two. Her father and mother stared: so did Ted, for a moment. Then his face cleared, and he twinkled like a child.

‘You’re making fun of me, Miss Harris,’ he said.

But he didn’t seem to mind in the least, and two or three times more that evening she caught his eye fixed upon her, and they smiled at one another. She had shown herself to him in a completely new light.

After that, things went their inevitable, steady course. Ted came regularly, and Freda, taken to task in her mother’s bedroom, admitted that she liked him very much. He was making progress in his business, and every one spoke of him with approval, so that the Harrises, loth though they were to lose their only daughter, could find no real objection. Freda’s liking grew to a warm glow of affection, and in that state she had married him, remaining happy ever since.

It must not be supposed, from this account, that she was unintelligent. Rather, she had lived in such a way that no demand was made on her intelligence.¹ Sharing in Ted’s life quickened it a little, for he consulted her about everything: but often, when something within felt impatient and prompted her to say and do new things, she felt herself draw back, remembering the quiet conventions which had made her life, and looking, metaphorically, to see if she were being

watched with disapproval. There were no children: so her love for Ted filled her whole sky. She was his mother as well as his wife.

'You look as nice as any of them, Fre: nicer, to my mind.'

They were sitting in their new bathing dresses, on the shores of Cauma See. The little bright lake, in its deeply wooded pit, was gay with cries, laughter, and flashing colours. Boats and canoes, all manned by bathers in radiant hues, covered its azure surface. Swimmers' heads dotted it. Here and there a man would lie on his back, kicking up the bright foam and shouting with laughter. A crowd were playing ball on the little wooded island in the middle: two young Apollos, naked to the waist, were paddling a plank along, yodelling madly; and everywhere on the banks, wearing as little as they possibly could, sat and lay and lazed a crowd of people of all ages, bemused with sunshine and happiness.

Ted and Freda had been shocked at first by the scanty costumes people wore, and the way they undressed, almost in public: for the bushes made a conventional rather than a real screen. Then, seeing how jolly every one was, and how all this seemed to be taken for granted, they plucked up courage, and bought two bathing dresses: a green one with white stripes for Freda, a white top with navy blue drawers for Ted. Getting down one morning early, before the crush—you had to walk nearly a mile through the sweet-smelling pinewoods—they chose the thickest bush they could find, and undressed hastily behind it. Ted argued great caution at first, lest they should get their arms and legs too much sunburned, but it felt so warm and harmless that he waxed brave, and, when he came to undress for bed, he was as red as a lobster. Freda, who had got in first, cried out at the sight of him. The funny thing was that he was rather pleased.

'It's pretty sore,' he said, gingerly feeling his shoulder, and grinned at her with a sort of rueful pride, like a small boy.

'You great baby,' she exclaimed. 'You *are* a baby!' Then: 'Hadn't you better put something on it?'

But it was better now. For a couple of days Ted said 'Ow' whenever he turned over in bed, and had to be helped

on and off with his coat: but now they could bear the sun all day. Freda had consulted the village chemist, in halting French: they oiled themselves like professionals, and sat unconcerned.

They were recognized now. Their names had been some days in the official gazette, and the leader of the little orchestra which played every other evening in the hotel invariably bowed to Freda when she entered or left the lounge. Freda loved the orchestra. She was musical, and played quite nicely herself. On the way up from Reichenau they had listened in sleepy amazement to the queer hooter of the diligence. 'Hee-ho-haw, hee-ho-haw, hee-ho-haw,' it said, on three funny unrelated notes.

'Queer interval that,' said Ted. 'One of those foreign scales, is it?'

Freda shook her head decisively.

'It isn't a proper interval at all,' she said. 'The second note's sharp, and the third's flat, that's all. It ought to be . . . ' and she hummed a corrected version.

This being so, it made her both happy and indignant to see the care and enthusiasm of the little orchestra, in the midst of the lounge's chatter and confusion. She did not know how people could chatter instead of listening to such excellent playing. She sat as near as she could, Ted with her: and the roving eye of the leader soon saw, and responded, to, a devotee. Then, the concierge always beamed and tried out his three or four words of English. Several of the guests bowed or smiled if one passed them on the stairs: and the old waitress at their table, who had been six months in London, was as delighted with them as they were with her. Yes: they felt regular inhabitants of the place, able and entitled to look appraisingly at new arrivals.

In their fellow guests they took the keenest possible interest. Freda in particular, having none of the insular prejudice common to her social superiors, was able to appreciate them fully. Their clothes did not shock her. She was not put off when fat men came in to lunch in a shirt and braces, nor when their enormous ladies breakfasted with them on the terrace in kimonos. ('Like a marquee,' she whispered to Ted, about one of them: and they both immediately got the

giggles, and had to leave their breakfast unfinished, and hurry away.) All these things seemed to her part of the place's essential difference from home, and she seized upon them with delight.

She and Ted had names for the more striking guests. There was Madame la Baronne, with her two feline but handsome daughters. They never knew if she was actually Madame la Baronne, but there was one in the gazette, and she looked the most suitable claimant for the title. Then there was the Duck, a great amiable waddling Dutchwoman, whose husband spoke a few words of English and offered them an illustrated paper. There was the Genius, a picturesque young man with blue eyes and a mop of fair curly hair, who sat by himself, attitudinized, played the piano with a sort of expert inaccuracy, but seemed touchingly pleased when any one noticed him, and was ready to join in the most childish games. He wore check trousers, and white shirts with a Byron collar: in the evening, a velvet coat and a flowing black bow. There was something pathetic about him. Freda guessed that he pursued in real life some very humdrum occupation, and now seized the opportunity to live in make-believe, half afraid all the time that some one would see through him. There was a whole catalogue full of guests, for Ted and Freda to watch and speculate about. Freda did most of the speculating, while Ted wondered, was mildly shocked, or laughed and said: 'Don't be silly, Fre'; by which he really meant: 'Go on.'

And then came the Big Man.

It happened at lunch. Ted and Freda were sitting at their table near the door, when a shadow fell across it, and Freda looked up, to behold the most magnificent human being she had ever seen in her life. A man of six feet four or five, and broad in proportion, was standing in the gangway between the tables, with a companion of normal size. He moved his massive head from side to side, looking for a place: and Freda had time to see that his dark hair was just going grey at the temples, his face was bronzed, and his eyes a wonderful clear grey. Then the head waiter rushed up effusively, to pilot the couple to their table: and as the enormous figure

strode down the room, a hush fell over the tables, and every one stared in admiration and amazement.

Once seated, the big man looked smilingly round, taking frank stock of every one, as if he were quite unconscious of the stir he had created. His companion said something, which he leaned forward to hear, with a flash of his great white teeth: then he proceeded to tuck his napkin into his waistcoat, and was soon eating with the serious attention of a man enjoying the first meal of his holiday. It was some time before he spoke: but presently, pushing away his plate, he made a remark to his friend, and shook with enormous laughter.

He sat for a while on the terrace afterwards. Freda could not take her eyes off him. Ted had to tell her twice that the picnic basket was ready, and she followed him up the road half in a dream; enjoying the picnic all the more for the thought that she would be able to watch the big man again at dinner.

She dreamed sunnily all that afternoon, and Ted, who was never talkative, respected her mood. If she had been asked, Freda could not have told what her dreams were about. They were a part of lying on one's back on scented pine-needles and looking up at the sky past tall stems that soared, pure and straight, till they burst like soft rockets into feathery green. They were a part of the giant flecks of sunlight between the trees, and the sleepy tinkle of cowbells in the valley.

She got Ted early down to dinner that night, and watched for the big man. He was eleven minutes late, and she noted that he already bowed to the people at the tables adjoining his own. After dinner, guests crowded out as early as they could into the lounge, for the orchestra. Not knowing about this, the big man and his friend found every place taken, and Freda had the disappointment of seeing them make their way to another room. It was, already, a real disappointment. After the concert, she talked a great deal to Ted, on a great variety of subjects.

The next day was wet: a steady, soft, straight rain that knew its business and attended to it. This chance, with one

or two others, brought about something which Freda had never even dreamed. No idea of speaking to the Big Man had yet entered her head. She merely wanted, with an imperative inward necessity, to be in the same room with him, and to watch him.

Yet the marvellous thing happened, and quite simply. Seeing how hopeless the weather was, Ted had gone philosophically off to write letters. This meant that Freda, book in hand, her heart beating a good deal faster than usual, could wander about with good conscience, seeking a quiet corner. The lounge she drew blank. Humming to herself, she tried the reading-room. Two old men sat in it smoking, surrounded by all the papers they could lay their hands on, looking for all the world like engorged spiders. She closed the door again softly, and made for the drawing-room. The sound of a piano greeted her ears, and she noted subconsciously that the Genius was in full spate: all her consciousness was held by the huge figure near the window. Marvelling at her own courage, she crossed the room, and took a chair on the far side of the fireplace, facing him.

He read with a concentrated and childlike attention, frowning at his book, seriously resolved to master what it said. He had not looked up as she came in, and Freda, her book open upon her knee, was able to watch him to her heart's content. Presently he began to stir and mutter. The Genius had been performing to a couple of young girls, but they ran off, and he now waxed more and more flamboyant, playing snatches of everything he could remember and pausing, as if for inspiration, to run his fingers through his hair. Suddenly the Big Man looked up at him under contracted brows. Then he looked across at Freda, grinned, and made a face. Before she realized, Freda had grinned and made a face back. The Genius finished on a smashing chord, rubbed his long hands together, and looked up at the ceiling. Then he burst into a Liszt rhapsody, *con brio*, and with a liberal allowance of wrong notes.

The Big Man rumbled thunderously in his chair. He scowled at the Genius's back.

'Es ist zu . . . !' he muttered, half to Freda, half to himself.

Freda smiled, and shrugged her shoulders. 'I agree, but what can one do?' said her gesture.

The Big Man endured another couple of minutes. Then, placing a marker in his book, and setting it carefully down, he rose, went over to the pianist, and tapped him on the shoulder. Freda did not know what he said—it was in German: but it was certainly effective. The poor Genius spread out his hands, as if to say: 'As you will'; closed the lid of the piano; and walked out, to solace his wounded ego in the woods. The Big Man said something in German to the other occupant of the room, a little nervous man reading a paper; smiled happily at Freda; and resumed his book. After that, he paid no more attention to her or to any one else. The incident was closed.

The Big Man made a lot of friends in the hotel that day, and after dinner Freda had to watch him playing silly card games in the lounge. He had become acquainted with a florid lady with peroxide hair, who had two daughters, one nearly grown up: and now a whole happy party, including the Genius—all forgiven and forgotten—were sitting round a table, having the most tremendous fun. The Big Man kept making mistakes, evidently, for they would all stop and abuse him: the younger girl even slapped his arm: whereupon he would cover his face in his hands and shake and shake with enormous laughter. He would clasp his hands and promise the little girl not to be so silly again; but he was incurable. His roars of delight infected the whole room. Every one turned and smiled. Even cross old men, who looked up annoyed from their newspapers, watched for a minute with twitching lips, and subsided before they were caught smiling openly. And Freda, watching eagerly, smiles flickering and quivering over her face, felt terribly shut out: there in spirit, enjoying every second of it, but kept away by the barrier of an alien language. Even the Genius, against whom she and the Big Man had so lately made common cause, could address to him a torrent of words, and the Big Man would lean over, and nod a dozen times, crying '*Ja, ja ja,*' and beaming with the uttermost goodwill. It was Freda who was out of it now.

'What an attractive great chap that is,' said Ted, when they had gone upstairs. 'Quite infectious, the way he makes you laugh.'

'Yes, isn't it,' cried Freda, turning gratefully to him: and she began to talk about the Big Man, for it was a relief to be able to talk naturally about him to Ted.

'I saw him being introduced to that lady's children, this afternoon, and he was ever so nice to them. Just as if they were grown-ups,' said Ted, sitting down and pulling off his socks.

'I'm sure he would be,' replied Freda, fervently, but a funny little pang stabbed her, to hear that Ted had seen something of him which she had missed. Still, the Big Man now so dominated her imagination that she could see for herself anything which another person told her about him, and make it her own.

The next day Freda had it all out with herself. The Big Man had breakfasted early, and disappeared on an expedition with his friend. She preferred to know that he was out of the way, like that: then she could give herself up to her own and Ted's day, without the torment of feeling she was missing him. Ted and she went up to Runca, and there, sitting a little apart from him, looking up to the great jagged row of peaks across the valley, she essayed the difficult and hitherto unnecessary task of looking into her own heart.

She was not in love with the Big Man: that is, not in the ordinary way. She hardly felt towards him as towards a *person* at all. He was a landscape, a mountain, a tree, a force of life. When she could look at him, and hear the deep rich rumble of his voice, she lived on a higher level. His presence fed something in her which up till now had only faintly stirred: fed it, warmed it, and made it live. She recognized the something, now. It was that undefined sense which in the past had sometimes made her impatient: something with wider horizons, with quicker pulses; something which, in the midst of her quiet happiness, had hinted a sense of possibility, and of loss. It was that something which, before she was aware, had made a face and smiled at the Big Man in the drawing-room; actions impossible to, unthinkable by, Freda, the builder's daughter of Surbiton.

A something now very much alive, very much on the spot, ready, it appeared, to pop out on the first provocation.

With new shrewdness, and an insight for new possibilities, she looked into what had happened. Was it just the change from home, and the fresh surroundings? Had the loveliness of the country turned her sentimental? Was it merely the freedom of new manners—Cauma See, undressing in the open, sitting about in bathing costumes? Had the breaking down of conventional barriers involved something more important? She was not going to spare herself, and her mind explored the most uncomplimentary possibilities, but to no purpose. From any attempt to label it with a disparaging name her regard for the Big Man rose solid and strong, like a rock, shattering wave after wave. It was a part of the great scene before her, a part of life. And, for the first time, she saw what life might mean.

No: she was not in love. She did not desire to be kissed by the Big Man. From the very thought her mind shied off in confusion, for such an embrace would be, not feeling, but annihilation. The picture of that great head, noble, rugged, ingenuous: not beautiful, really: almost ugly: but magnificently appropriate to the man's significance: the thought of it moved her to the same breathless reverence she had felt in the woods above the lake. Watching his expression was like watching the play of sun and shadow on a mountain. And—final proof of its rightness—the whole thing made her love Ted more dearly than ever. She wanted to hold him tight in her arms and cry with sheer happiness.

As the pair walked home, with long mountain shadows falling across the valleys, they passed above a woodcutter's hut. The peasants had finished work, and were gathered round a burner, preparing their meal. They waved to the visitors; then one produced a concertina, and at once all began to sing. The happy, meaningless music rose, harmonizing perfectly with the tall brown trees, the sunset glow, and the scent of pines in the air. Freda, catching Ted's arm, felt she would die of happiness.

But there is danger in having one's problems solved by ecstasy. Freda, who had floated home upon a serene and

luminous tide of joy, found that her self-analysis had not been as complete as she supposed.

After dinner, the Big Man sat at the peroxide lady's table. Freda watched him happily, until the moment he rose to go. With a perfect gesture, he stooped and kissed the lady's hand. Then something red and stinging seemed to grip Freda inside, so that she could hardly breathe or see; and for a moment she wanted to kill the peroxide lady. It was stunning, without precedent, absolutely horrifying. Freda had never suspected that such a passion could exist, much less that she herself could feel it.

For an age she sat, seeing nothing, feeling sick: and when Ted presently leaned forward and said: 'D'you realize, Fre, we've only got three days left?' she started, and faced him like a wild animal, almost as if he had struck her.

She had always let Ted manage everything. He approached all officials, took all tickets, and asked the way: Freda stood by. Yet the next day found her coolly and desperately determined to find out the Big Man's name. She had considered asking Ted to do it for her. He would, of course, but he would be puzzled, and ask questions, or even chaff her. Wondering for a moment how much he had noticed, she decided not to risk embarrassing him, as well as herself, by dragging things into the open. She would act for herself.

It was not easy. She tried half-heartedly the method of watching the letter-rack, but he did not appear, and the concierge, thinking she was looking for a letter, came out and explained loudly that there was none, making every one look round: so she had to thank him and hurry away, blushing. She would have to ask, that was all. But whom? The old waitress? She could hardly manage this without Ted's hearing: besides, ten to one the waitress would not know. The concierge? Or the youth who worked the lift, and took turns to sit in the office? These were the only possibles. The manager, if she asked him, would think she had come to make a complaint. He was a bewhiskered old man, shooting suspicious glances right and left under his bushy eyebrows.

When she came downstairs again, full of resolve, the

concierge had gone off duty, and the youth was in charge. Never had the hall been so full of people. For a full hour Freda waited, sick and furious. They gossiped with the youth, they drew up chairs close to the office, they read aloud to one another from the *Gazette*. There was not the slightest chance. Her request would seem queer enough anyhow: it simply must not be overheard. At last all melted away but the Duck. She stayed a solid ten minutes, then rose and waddled off. The moment had come. Clearing her throat, Freda rose and walked slowly over. She would ask with an air of faint, amused curiosity. The youth looked up: she was opening her mouth to speak, when suddenly the lift bell rang shrilly, and the youth, muttering 'Pardon', ran to it and disappeared. Freda could have wept.

Almost at once Ted came to find her:

'There you are, old girl; I wondered where on earth you'd got to.'

She had to smile, take his arm, and go for a stroll.

But, in the evening, fate was kinder. The chance came, and she darted to the office—past caring what the youth or any one thought.

'Excuse me,' she stammered, in French, 'but can you by any chance tell me the name of the very big gentleman'—and she made a gesture with her hand—'who came on Thursday last, with another gentleman?'

The youth neither shrugged his shoulders nor raised his eyebrows, but somehow conveyed an impression of doing both. He took out the register, opened it, and shoved it under Freda's nose.

'There,' he said. 'One of those two, I cannot say which.'

The unaccustomed characters danced before Freda's eyes, but she managed to read them.

'Herr Oscar Melius, Wien,' she read. 'Herr Stanislas Tauber, Wien.' She looked up. 'Thank you so much,' she gasped. 'I—I wished to know'; and fled upstairs.

Oh dear, oh dear! Almost worse than not knowing at all! But her discouragement was only brief. The new, enterprising Freda came to the rescue. It would be easy now, she scolded. All she had to do now was to ask the concierge which was which. He was friendly and amiable;

not supercilious, like the youth. The old Freda listened to the new Freda, and at once felt better.

When they went down to dinner, they passed the Big Man in the hall, and he bowed to them both, a grave, courtly bow. Freda saw with delight that Ted was pleased.

'I'm glad you like him too,' she said impulsively, and squeezed his arm.

If Ted was surprised, he did not show it.

'Nice chap,' he said. Then, smiling at her, 'He's quite taken your fancy, hasn't he?'

'He has,' rejoined Freda, smiling back thankfully. That was all right, then. She felt such a rush of thankfulness and affection for Ted that she could hardly swallow her soup. Darling Ted! He was the best in the world. Of course he wouldn't misunderstand.

But her heart soon sank again. There was only one day more.

'Excuse me—but could you tell me if the very big gentleman is Herr Tauber, or Herr Melius?'

'The big gentleman?' The concierge grinned all across his face, and held his hand as high as he could from the floor. 'The big gentleman?' he cried. 'That is Herr Melius. Herr Melius.'

'Thank you so much,' said Freda hurriedly. He was shouting so loud that every one in the lounge could hear. But the concierge wished to establish his point. Believing that all English people were mentally deficient, he wished to leave no loophole for misunderstanding.

'Melius,' he shouted happily, after the retreating Freda. 'Emm—é—ell—ee—oo—esss! Melius. Yes, Madame. The big Monsieur. Melius.'

Freda turned and ran, leaving the concierge with fresh data to support his theory.

Well, that was over, at any rate. She sat on her bed, panting, and made a face at her reflection in the big glass. What did it matter, what they thought of her! She knew his name now.

It was unthinkable, to go without knowing his name. To let life carry her away helplessly, without a struggle, from

the greatest wonder it had ever shown her. She saw what had happened as a chance, tossed to her half contemptuously by life. Very well. She would take the chance.

The Big Man was in a canoe, on Cauma See, with the two daughters of the peroxide lady, and the Genius. They were too big a load, and after every few strokes it would capsize. Gasping and screaming with laughter, they would right it, push it into a shallow, and get on board again. After each immersion the Big Man came on whooping and roaring, in a pother of foam, like a great bear. He laughed so much that in the end he had to sit on a rock and get his breath, his magnificent bronzed chest heaving, his great arms hugging his knees. Freda swam over as near as she could, but he did not see her.

Afterwards, the four put on dry costumes, and sat in their dressing-gowns, drinking coffee at the open-air restaurant and listening to the orchestra. It was playing *Fingal's Cave*. The four listened seriously, in absolute silence, and the Big Man's face was stern and beautiful. Oh, cried Freda's heart, he touches life at every point. He *is* life.

It was the last morning. Freda had got up before breakfast, and finished her packing. Generally she got Ted's things ready for him, too, since, surprising though it seemed, that highly competent person was not clever at packing. This morning, for the first time, she had not done so, and she felt a little guilty, seeing out of the corner of her eye the dear old creature beginning to rummage seriously in the chest of drawers, with furrowed brow. She didn't want him about the place, for the next hour.

She knew by now at what hour the Big Man appeared in the morning. He would not be down before ten. The diligence left at eleven-thirty, bearing them away. So short, so short a time! Tearing her mind from the realization that nothing could happen in an hour and a half, she saw that she must leave that space at his disposal. They were going away; he had never even spoken to her, and soon she would be leaving, never to see him again. A sick pain, like a cramp,

almost doubled her in two. She straightened up, passing the back of her hand across her forehead.

'Here, darling. Let me help you.' There was a quarter of an hour to spare.

'I'm all right, thanks, Fre. You go for a stroll, or something.'

She stood still, and looked sharply at the back of his head. How much did Ted realize? Oh, well: no good worrying about Ted now. She would have the rest of her life in which to do that.

Crossing to the window, she put her hands on the ledge, and leaned out. There, below her, strolling slowly up the road with his hands in his pockets, was the Big Man.

'Thanks. I think I will, then, if you're sure there's nothing I can do.'

She went swiftly but composedly down the stairs. In the hall was the Big Man's hat and coat, with his friend's, and a paper parcel of lunch. He was going off on one of the day motor trips, then; and they started at ten-fifteen. That was why he was so early.

She walked up the road slowly, looking in the little shop windows. He was out of sight when she left the hotel, but as soon as she got round the curve she saw him, standing in the middle of the road, looking around, sniffing up the morning air like some great animal. She looked at the weather forecast, which she couldn't read, as it was in German. Then, as he turned to come back, she went on to the next shop window, which was full of enchanting little clocks and watches.

When he was a few yards off, she left the shop window, and walked boldly on to pass him. No practised beauty, no courtier's lady in the world could have done it more naturally than Freda—had she only known. All Freda knew was that her heart was beating so fast she would surely die.

They were near. Risking her all, she looked up, and smiled.

A great answering smile broke over his face.

'Goot morg-ning!' he said; and passed on down the road.

It was over. But he had spoken to her. Hallelujah. He

had spoken to her. Oh, oh, oh. He had spoken to her. Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace. The deep, thick note of his voice would sound in her heart for ever.

Yet the thankfulness brought another feeling, a swift hunger for expression. He was gone, but she must affirm the link which bound them.

Hurrying into the deserted writing-room, she took a pen, and wrote swiftly:

Hotel des Pins,
Waldhaus.

MONSIEUR,

Si par hazard vous allez voyager en Angleterre, et si vous voulez écrire à 119 Laurel Grove, Sydenham, London, S.E. 26, vous y trouverez des amis.

How should she sign it? Oh, how *could* she? What would he think of her? Oh, why, why, why were women so hedged in with ridiculous laws! No, it wasn't that. He must have women after him wherever he went. He must be well accustomed to them by now. He would laugh, and toss the letter across to his friend. Oh, no, no! Biting her lip, with sudden resolution she signed the letter:

Tout à vous,
EDWARD E. SUTTON.

'Hee-ho-haw,' sounded the diligence, 'Hee-ho-haw,' with precisely the same impersonal cheerfulness as when it had brought them, a fortnight ago. A fortnight? A lifetime.

Freda sat clasping her bag, in which was the letter. Her mind was in turmoil. Ted pointed out one or two things by the roadway, places they had visited, things no longer full of promise for them: then he fell silent. Freda could only smile mechanically.

Suddenly the mist cleared from her understanding, and she saw everything. The episode was perfect. This morning, on the last morning, he had spoken to her, thus completing it. She must not spoil it, with any greedy, ungrateful reachings after more, with efforts which were bound to fail. No good

could come of that. And to forge Ted's name. Deceit: her first act of deceit. Was *that* the way she responded to the finest experience of her life?

With an intuition which pierced forward into the kernel of her future, a vision like the powerful headlight of a car on a straight road, she saw that what had happened would govern and enrich the years that lay ahead: that a new Freda had been born, whose task was to interpret that revelation, not debase it to the seed of a cowardly and peevish discontent. The wound was deep, but clean. It must hurt, and go on hurting; but it would heal, and her whole life would be the better for it.

A glow came over her, and she wondered how she could have been such a fool. Slipping her fingers into her handbag, she took out the letter, and tore it stealthily across, and across, and across.

'I believe, Fre, you're glad to be going home again,' said Ted, presently, as they stood on Reichenau platform, waiting for the train.

Freda turned to him like a child.

'Ted,' she said simply, 'I believe I am.'

XII

DEATH OF THE GARDENER

THE unexpected June shower thinned suddenly: its whispering ceased. It hung a minute in the air, a veil of gleaming gossamer, dissolved, and drifted out to sea. Looking carefully about him, Ian McLean came out from under the thorn where he had been sheltering, and swung the empty sack from his shoulders. A bout of rheumatic fever, some years ago, had made him pay heed to showers.

Standing with his legs apart, folding the sack, and drawing a deep breath, he gazed on a transfigured world. The evening had been beautiful before. He was not conscious that anything could be added to it. But now, each arching

frond of bracken, each blade of grass, sparkled with points of light. The road glistened, and the boulders above it; the broom revived and glowed. Even the iron posts of the old wire fence across the road shone glossy as jackdaws, while rows of single jewels hung from the underside of every wire. Beyond, the reeds stood up, fresh, delicate green above the milk-white sandhills: the stretch of sea was calm and luminous as silk, and Skye, the enchanted island, rose, picked out with emerald, its jagged, fantastic pinnacles dim as a bloom upon the evening sky.

Ian gazed, rubbed his ginger moustache with a huge, freckled finger, and went on to fetch his goat. His day's work in the garden was over. It had been a heavy day, for next Friday the family were coming to the Big House for their summer holidays, and he wanted to have all in order. Do what he would, it was impossible to start making ready till a bare ten days before they arrived. The northern spring came late. Next Friday would be the first of July, and the garden was a good six weeks behind their garden in the south. They knew that, of course. They were always very just, very generous, ever since he entered their service, thirty-six years ago. It was for this reason, not for his own credit, that Ian wished he could make the garden do impossible things. He could coax more out of it than any man; but the little hill and the row of pines, which so effectually sheltered it from the south and west, kept off a deal of sun, and the soil was light.

'Meh-eh-eh-heheh!'

Martha saw him coming. She was straining on her tether, stretching out her thin neck, and bleating welcome. He had put her a hundred yards up the slope, where the grass grew strong and sweet. Ian looked up at her, but did not speak until he had climbed a good third of the way. Then, to tease her, he called in a soft, enticing voice: 'Mar-tha! Eh, girl! Mar-tha!' and chuckled to see her impatient efforts to get free.

Soon, leisurely, he had reached her, and stooped to untie the picket. She leaned against him, shoving her head into the hollow between his chest and his thigh as he bent down, almost pushing him over. He had to put out a hand and catch her across the nose, to hold her off.

'Easy, easy, now! There, girl! There!'

He stood up, breathing hard, and coiled the picket rope, leaving a yard loose to lead her home. From the height, he took a fresh look around. It was a marvellous evening, clear, soft, and shining. Unconsciously, he was guessing to-morrow's weather: such divination being instinctive, a part of his reaction to the scene. Apparently the inspection satisfied him, for he gave a deep sigh of content, and started downhill. Martha, who had been looking up at him with her mild lozenge eyes, turned suddenly frolicsome. She skipped from tuft to tuft, gazing mischievously down at the ground, and forcing him hurriedly to pay her out more rope, lest she pull him over.

'Easy, easy girl! What's come to you, indeed! You'll turn the milk for our supper. Easy! Do you hear me, now!'

The goat stopped, and looked up at him, her long face full of irreverence. He laughed, and made as if to give her a clout with his left hand. She bucked, put down her head, turned her back and reared up on her hind legs. Well contented, he led her down to the road, shaking her rope, and chiding her affectionately.

Once upon the level, Martha became demure, and walked along quietly, her hoofs clicking on the rough, uneven surface. Their sound contrasted sharply with Ian's slow stride, and the echoes of both were intensified as soon as they came under the high eastern wall of the garden.

Ian worked in sight of his cottage, and that was a great comfort to him on rainy days, or in the winter-time. All he had to do was to lock the gate in the tall iron railings, cross the gravel drive, and plunge down a smaller, overgrown drive that led to his own back door. A minute from leaving work, he could be sitting in front of the kitchen fire, and exchanging the news of the past three hours with his wife. It was easy work, in the short winter days, when the sun set at four, and a chill rose from the little overgrown drive, a chill he loved, for it meant home and the fireside. Ian had come to a time of life when he liked easy work. His spirit was willing; he worked hard when hard work was needed; but he was frankly glad when it was not needed. He was sixty-two,

though no one would guess it, and at sixty-two the lust for hard work out of doors has passed.

Ian swung open the main gate of the drive—Martha, at the last moment, pretending to object—and the footsteps of man and beast were blurred on the grass of the lesser drive. Arrived at his cottage, he called twice to his wife. There was no answer, so he unhooked a large blue jug from inside the door, turned an empty box on its side, and milked the goat himself. A pint, morning and evening, was Martha's yield: plenty for the two of them.

'Still! Keep still. Wait you now. There's my girl.'

He had barely finished when his wife came down the drive. She had been up all day getting things ready at the Big House, and had waited for the shower. She was a short, dumpy woman some ten years Ian's junior, with soft, kindly eyes, and a mouth which could show unexpected resolution. Her general air was mildly deprecating, but when the mouth hardened, as it did upon all points of principle, Mrs. Ian was more immovable than a dozen Marthas. For the big, easy-going, gentle man she had been an ideal mate. To give in to her was little hardship, and, judged by results, she gave wise counsel. Between them, in the Family's absence they took care of house and estate: and no lodge in the Western Highlands had better caretakers.

They had little to say to one another, as they sat down presently to supper. Mrs. Ian told in her habitual plaintive monotone what rooms she had cleaned out, how there were two tiles off the washhouse roof, how a small packet of table knives had been mislaid, and what was still to do. Ian, between mouthfuls, told her of his doings in the garden, a few words at a time.

'There is a third young robin now . . . comes and sits beside me . . . while I am at the beds. When I sat down . . . the biggest one flew over and perched on my knee. Not afraid, not afraid at all.'

'Well, really, now. The artful thing.'

'The strawberries . . . I have them well netted. A few of them are too far on, I am afraid. But most of them will be well for Friday.'

'Mrs. MacCallum told me she had it in a letter from Mrs.

Young that Miss Monica was no looking at all well this summer.'

'Och, now.'

'Yes. A trouble of some kind, Mrs. Young is of the opinion.'

'Well! The poor young lady!'

Mrs. Ian gave him a glance in which there was a spark of exasperation. He went on with his meal, tiresomely incurious, giving her no opportunity to open up the surmises which were teeming in her mind.

The meal over, they sat for a while in silence, and Ian read the paper. He read it always in the same way, sitting with his knees wide apart, holding it open at right angles, high up; never folding back a page, nor even sloping it, to get the light. Little light came in, even from the brilliant westering sun, for the window was all overgrown with fuchsia; and the bees, still lazily occupied among the blossoms, kept up a sleepy bourdon, as if in the peace of the evening they had forgotten why they came.

For half an hour, maybe, Ian read on: becoming conscious, towards its end, that his wife was beginning to stir meaningly. Not till she said 'Now, Ian,' did he fold the paper, put it by, and go over to the little table in the corner. From it he lifted a large Bible, and a small book of devotions (presented to Mrs. Ian by the Family), and brought them to the kitchen table. He carried the Bible with his huge hands pressed open against its sides, and set it down carefully upon the table, as if it were very heavy, and made of glass. The devotion book, which was small and light, rode on top.

Leaning forward, and scrutinizing the cover of the Bible, Ian blew at it, causing his wife to look up sharply. But she said nothing; and, as Ian opened the Bible, and found the place, she folded her hands upon her lap, and drew down her lips into an appropriate expression of severity.

'Let us read the Word of the Lord, in the thirty-third chapter of Deuteronomy.'

Adjusting his spectacles, Ian read, with a kind of hushed earnestness, giving out every detail of every verse with equal emphasis. It was all alike to them both, the Word of the Lord, comprehensible or incomprehensible, of sovereign merit

and power, the message and the discipline of salvation. Every night, save Sunday, the two held their short service together: and if Mrs. Ian accentuated the discipline, and kept him up to the mark, Ian was more than ready to comply. He was not always in a hurry to begin: he loved his pipe and his paper: but, once those were laid aside, he worshipped with the full devotion of his soul.

Slowly, carefully, and earnestly, following the text with his forefinger, he read the Word.

'There is none like to the God of Jeshurun, who rideth upon the heaven in thy help, and in His excellency on the sky.'

'The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms . . .'

Monotonously his voice went on, and the bees still buzzed drowsily outside the window, and the kettle murmured on the range to make their good-night cup of tea. Then, the reading over, Ian shut the Bible, and took up the devotion book. For an instant, they looked at one another: then they turned back to back, pushed their chairs forward, kneeled, and prayed. A note of strain came into Ian's voice, for it was hard to kneel and read from the little book. The print was small: he was obliged to twist sideways, to catch what was left of the light. And so, having commended to Almighty God the Family, their daughter away in Glasgow, their son afloat, and themselves, they rose: Ian put away the books and Mrs. Ian busied herself with the tea.

'I don't think I'll take a cup the night. I'm hot. I'll just take a cup of cold water, from the tap.'

His wife straightened up.

'No take a cup of tea? Why will ye not, I'd like to know? What's better for ye?'

'Och, I'm a bit hot, yet.'

'Take your tea, now. Cold water is no a healthy thing to drink before your bed.'

'No. I have a fancy for the water.'

Mrs. Ian gave a grunt, and went on making the tea. A minute passed before she spoke again.

'Many persons have given themselves an internal chill swallowing down pints of cold water when they were

hot from their work. Do you no mind Andrew McPhail below—'

'Och, I'm no going to swallow down pints. I'm only going to take a half cupful. And I'm no perspiring. I'm just dry.'

He spoke good-humouredly, but she made no more attempt to overrule him. She came to the table, and sat sipping her tea. His big boots scraped on the flags outside, and, listening sharply to gauge the amount, she had to admit that it could be only a half cupful.

He returned, hung up the cup, and wiped his moustache with the back of his hand. She looked sideways at him.

'Will you no try a drop now, to take the chill out of the water?'

'Thank you, no. I'm well as I am.'

They sat up for a few minutes more. Then Ian rose, to fasten up for the night. As he stood up, he stiffened slightly, and a momentary look of incredulity passed across his face. A strange, uneasy tremor, quick, slight, but disturbing, made him wonder for an instant if the cold water, after all, had gone astray. He blew, and squared his shoulders. The feeling had vanished. He could not even be sure he had felt anything: and he went into the tiny porch with a smile.

The pine-wood stair was narrow and winding: it had no window. Ian held up the candle for his wife to go first, and open the door. Then he blew it out, cupping his hand carefully behind it, lest a drop of grease fall. The bedroom was full of light from the west.

'I am well on with the work,' Ian was saying presently, as he pulled off his heavy woollen socks. 'I have the worst of it over me now. There's no much to be done, till they come.'

'That's a good thing. I don't fancy you to be working so hard, in the hot weather.'

Ian looked straight in front of him. He knew well enough that if there was the least sign of the work being behindhand, she would press him without concern. Her loyalty to the Family was paramount. Sooner than have the smallest thing undone in preparation for their coming, she would have let her own kitchen go untended.

They got down together into the queer, small, square double bed which they both stubbornly preferred to the bigger one provided by the Family, and were soon asleep.

Two hours later, Ian fell into a dream. He was walking to church in company on a hot day, under oppressive, copper skies. As he walked, the heat and inconvenience were aggravated by the fact that his stomach was growing insupportably heavy. For some reason, he was much ashamed of this condition, and laboured to conceal it from his companions. His difficulty became pain, and he began to blow so loudly that he almost woke himself from the dream. This is a dream, he said reassuringly to himself, this is just a dream; and, secure in this knowledge, he was allowing the dream to continue, when, without warning, he was hit a terrific blow in the stomach, which doubled him up gasping on his bed. The force of the blow was simply unbelievable, and it was followed by a thunderstorm of pain so blinding, so violent, that for a few seconds he had no idea of anything. Then the pain eased, and he lay, clutching the bedclothes, his heart thumping madly, the sweat pouring from his body. His wife, half roused, was stirring and murmuring resentfully. Ian's mind became suddenly alert. At all costs, he must not rouse her. That drop of cold water—he would never hear the end of it. He must hold on, as best he could, till the pain passed. Then perhaps—

A second blow crashed into the very middle of him, and his whole body was swept by a storm of agony. It came leaping on him, in great gusts, without mercy. He knew nothing but the pain. A great steel gripe swooped down, as if from a crane, plunging its curved prongs deep into his bowels: the prongs closed like a fist, and it was picked up, eviscerating him, tearing him with agony. He saw his wife's face, drawn with fright, her eyes dark and staring in the candlelight. For a long time he could not realize her questions, much less answer them. Then the candle left the room. He rolled over on his side, convulsed, his knees rigid, biting at the hot, tumbled bedclothes.

Agony passed. Ian's self, his consciousness, lost all sense of place. He suffered agonies in a hundred worlds. Great

bursting shells of pain : great fiery wheels of white and stabbing blue : great agonized earthquakes, in which the racked earth, the burning mountains, were ground together and tugged into one great knot that strained, choked, and burst asunder. For the few moments when he knew his body, Ian could not believe that there was anything left in it. It felt deadly cold, as if the explosions had blown out all his inards. In these shivering respites, life came back to his stunned mind, and he began to hope that the fury of the illness was past. But, each time, the attack blazed out again : there were more explosions, more annihilations. . . .

His wife was busy at him, pulling back the clothes, pressing a hot water bottle against his stomach. He opened his eyes. She looked pale and owlish in the early morning light.

'I'm going away down to the Dobies', and ask them to fetch the doctor who is staying above at the farm.'

A lifetime of experience asserted itself, and he found that he could speak.

'You must no . . . go . . . till four, when they will be stirring. . . . The hay . . . tired . . .'

But she was gone. He was alone. 'The heat of the bottle, spreading through him, eased the pain, and made it manageable. He was suffering greatly, but at least he was a human being, lying on a bed. As his mind, returning to its home, began to lay hold on what had happened, a long sickening root of pain seemed to worm in between him and his heart. It bored so deep, with such cold threat of dissolution, that for the first time the idea came to him that he might not get better. There had never been such a pain before. Yes, said the root at once, writhing and twisting its way still deeper. You will not get better. You are going to die.

Immediately, with the certainty, came a wave of panic. An agonized sweat burst from him : his heart broke into sudden wild commotion : he began to struggle. Then, checked by a savage stab of the pain, he tried to pray. His hot lips babbled, but his mind would not help him. It shied off like a terrified animal from the half-seen spectre. In despair, he gripped it, forced it back, tried to think of a prayer, tried to think of the last prayers he had uttered : and at once, calm and quiet as a surmise, the remembrance came.

He heard again the words he had read a few hours before: 'The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.' Drenching, cool, and sweet, peace flooded his soul. Those words—they had been intended for his comfort. 'And underneath . . .' Then all was well. It was seldom he recalled any particular text, but this sounded in his ears with a voice like a singing bell. Blessed, blessed relief! He smiled, wondering how he could ever have been afraid. Then the pain came back, swinging its terrible hammers, and Ian again ceased to be a human being.

When he was next himself, it was clear morning. A man was bending over him. He recognized Dr. Fraser, the doctor from Edinburgh who was staying at the Dobies' farm-house. He tried to speak, but at once the room spun hideously round. A hand was on his forehead: there was a noise of some one trying to be sick. Now, he was flat on his back again. Words, meaningless, far off, floated in the air.

' . . . acute peritonitis . . . perforated appendix . . . his heart . . . '

As if it saw its enemy, the pain raged and stormed. Life, the world since it began, was nothing but wheel on wheel of flame. Great coughing volcanoes shot up flame from its centre: flails of fire drove it spinning through space. Fingers, icy cold, pulled up someone's sleeve: someone's arm felt a prick: the storms went off a little, turned into recognizable, separate thunder, sank to a throbbing rumble.

Ian had little more terrestrial consciousness. The morphia, withheld as long as there was hope, was given freely, once the heart weakened, to ease his end. He passed into a dim, slow day-dream, still in pain, but pain a long way off. Only once, past midday, did it prowl back, knocking with jagged hammers at his exhausted ribs: but before it shattered him he felt the welcome prick on his arm. With a great effort, he opened his eyes. Dr. Fraser smiled down into them.

'That better?'

Ian's eyes rolled shut, and he nodded faintly. Then he remembered something—his one worry, his one sense of guilt, which had been trailing him through many a nightmare. As his lips laboured to articulate it, the doctor bent close.

'It was no . . . the half cup of cold water . . . ?'

'Bless you, no. Nothing at all to do with it. It would have been all the same, if you'd drunk none, or half a gallon.'

Good. Good. That was well. He had not brought on all this by wilful obstinacy, by gainsaying Ellen.

'Tell . . . my wife . . .'

'I've told her. She knows. Here . . . Mrs. McLean?'

'Och, indeed, yes. I know. Yes, indeed, indeed, Ian dear. Och yes.'

Och yes. Och yes. Indeed. His mind floated away. . . .

He was in his garden. He saw it all very clearly: passively to begin with, then with awakening interest. The largest robin was sitting on the stone base of the iron railings. A corner of the netting had come loose above the strawberries. That must be seen to at once. He must go back and tell . . . go back and tell . . . tell . . .

A delicious vision rose before him, of gulls upon a rock. The sea, alive and gleaming in bright sunshine, was breaking softly over it, white as the gulls. They stood above, beyond the range of the waves. He saw them with amazing distinctness, their eyes, their bills, and the gleaming sides of the rock. With a wrench, he recalled his mind.

'Ellen.'

'Yes, dear. Yes. Don't you hear me. I'm here, I'm here.'

' . . . the strawberries . . . the net . . . corner . . .'

'Yes, yes. Now, don't fret. It is all right.'

' . . . the net . . .'

'Yes, yes.'

Yes. He fell asleep, too much exhausted to continue. Through the window came a thin, plaintive bleating. Martha was anxious to be milked. Mrs. Ian looked round doubtfully several times, but made no move.

'Meh-eh-eh! meh-eh-eh-eh!'

Ian, though not properly conscious, heard the familiar sound. He stirred uneasily. A colloquy in whispers followed, and in the end Mrs. Ian, tears streaming down her face, got up and went quickly from the room.

The bleating ceased.

Ian smiled. He was up on the hill, where he had tethered Martha the day before. It was a marvellous evening.

Gazing upon it, he began to rise in the air. Deliberately, he recalled himself, and felt the shape of the bed beneath his body. A minute, and he was back, well above the hill. It was like lying half asleep on Sunday morning. One could wake—let oneself go; wake—let oneself go. Only, now, the waking became harder, instead of easier.

The sea was luminous and very calm. Magnificent clouds towered in the air. He saw all the Islands, in ever-widening view, Skye, Rum, Eigg, Uist, Canna, Mull, and Coll: all the Western Islands, dark and clear, floating upon the still, wide sea. Suddenly he felt misgivings, to be so high above the ground. Then he remembered. 'He rideth upon the heaven to thy help, and in His excellency on the sky.' To thy help. To his help, Ian's.

There was nothing to fear. Confidently, thankfully, he abandoned himself. The western sea, the theatre of his life, each bay, each inlet, every rock and field, lay clear and beautiful beneath his feet. A sound arose from it all, without disturbing the vision, and he knew the sound to be his wife weeping. With a part of himself he willed to comfort her; but all he could say was 'I am ready to go.' He did not even know if he said it, but he willed it aloud, several times: 'I am ready to go.' The weeping rose louder, but, selfish now for the first time, he could not heed it.

Joy, rising from the sea like music, sang around him. The air was bright: the breeze smelt of the sea. He was upborne, supported: there was no more pain. With a sigh of uttermost content, he let himself go for the last time, and leaned back upon the everlasting arms.

XIII

DON JUAN AND THE WHEELBARROW

THIS here story—said Mr. Spaddacott—what I'm going to tell you gentlemen, begins with a woman, and goes on with a man. So if you was to ask me what it was about, I doubt

if I could answer 'ee in a word, like. Churchy le fam, as old 'Torney Waterbury used to say, meanin' that there's a woman to the back of most stories. And that isn't no lie—at least, not hereabouts, it isn't. There was most certainly a woman to the back of all Fred Bowhay's goin's on, and a good many others' too. Well, best come to a point.

Some six years ago 'twas, or near seven, there come a chap back to live in the village what had been some time away. Harry Salter, his name was. He 'listed in the war, and when the end of it come he found hisself out in Canada. A job offered for the man, workin' on a farm, and he took it. But, some way or other, Canada didn't suit en. He was took bad over there, and, what with one thing and another, he didn't fancy for to stay. He come home, with a nice little bit of money, built hisself a bungaloo up above Post Office, and looked around. Bein' a sensible-witted sort of chap, he didn't have to look far. He seen the needs of the folk hereabouts, went off up country, and come back with a second-handed Ford tractor.

A lot of money Harry made, rentin' out his tractor by the day, and time come when he added a light van, and a car for takin' visitors rides. London train'll stop over to Mewmouth Junction, if 'tis so ordained with the stationmaster, and it saves a hour and three-quarters to catch he; meanin' there's always call for a decent car what'll run people over the five mile odd to the Junction. In fack, 'twas plain to all eyes to see that Harry Salter was in a good way to settle hisself. And one pair of eyes what seen it belonged to a girl called Molly Bray.

Now, Molly Bray wasn't a bad sort, not to begin with, and I don't say she didn't care for the man. He was deep in love with she, of that there's no doubt. Her wasn't in her first bloom, bein' a matter of twenty-seven or twenty-eight year old. A soft-skinned, good-looking girl, very fair, and palish like; there'd always been plenty after her, and the wonder was her hadn't gone off long before. But they responsive sort be often very calculatin', and I reckon when Molly said 'Ees' to Harry Salter, her considered her'd known what her was about to wait so long.

Anyway, for a couple of years Harry was so happy as

could be, and Molly didn't do no harm except spend his money a bit on the free side. It must have worried en a little for he was careful, and he knew how quick and sudden a thing money may be. One day, you'm cock o' the walk; the next, there's three others in the same street, for all the lord of the manor gave 'ee understand to the contrary, under-sellin' your prices and offerin' what-dee-call bonuses to your bes' customers. Aah, I tell 'ee—— 'Owever. Ees. What was I a-sayin' of? Oh ees—spendin' money. Well, even if it did come near en a little, Harry couldn't have grudged to see her, for 'twas all part of his happiness to give her what she'd a mind to. So all went well—and then come one o' they cruel onaccountable misfortunes what will seize on a man for no reason at all.

Harry kep' his tractor and his van and his car in two sheds what he'd knocked up behind his bungalow. One night the sheds caught afire, and all he could save was the van, damaged very bad. But that wasn't the worst. The man's insurance had just run out, and he hadn't troubled to insure fresh before the beginnin' of the month. He was caught.

It didn't break him, but it put him back a matter of eight or nine hundred pound, and, o' course, it altered the style of his living. Reckonin' it all out, with Molly sitting at the table, givin' him no heed, he seemed he could make good his way again by livin' very meagre and careful for a matter o' three year. (Which same, by the way, he looked like doin', though that ain't the story.)

Well, Molly, she took all this very bad. She'd got used to a good time, and more money than the rest of the women. Now, to a stroke, she was cut short, and they was all bein' sorry for her. It galled the woman. Harry went on to his work head down, a frown to his brow, harder than ever. Molly looked at en, give her fair hair a toss, and beganned to show a leg. Ees. She were that sort o' girl, reelly. Responsive like—and often before a chap had said aught to re-spond to. Her wanted fun and jaunts and amusement, so her showed a leg—if you'll pardon my way o' speakin'. And the first one what cast a eye on it, and kep' it there, was no less a chap than Fred Bowhay.

Now, Fred Bowhay was manager for Smethwick's. I don't

need to tell *you* how the estates lies here, but the rest of the gentlemen will require to know it. All the big estates to the south is owned by Sir George Prynne; he's the lord of the manor. But the lands over opposite come into the market some fifteen year ago, and was bought by a rich London man of the name of Smethwick. De-termined to make a reel payin' estate of it, he was, and sinked no end o' money, same purpose. But, not knowin' nothin' of the business, and hearkenin' to every experk what come along—or every high-pretendin' toad what made wise he was a experk—he've collected a pretty rotten parcel o' neversweats, and the estate haven't come to much after all. Well, Mr. Smethwick, bein' away, handed over affairs to his nephew, young Mr. Holland: and this here Fred Bowhay was manager, answerable only to he.

Fred Bowhay, eh? Well, by jo, he was about the man to be in charge of such a business. A crooked, bold-faced chap, but—and this is the queer part o' me-tale, gentlemen—neither Fred nor Molly was reel bad by nature. Let all go smooth, let there be no fire in Harry Salter's garage, and no discontented Molly for to kinnel Fred on, and they two might just so well have gone on good ways and been respected decent folks. Leastways—well—I don't know about Fred. There was too much hookem-snivvy tatticks about that there estate not to set off a chap what had a tendency that way. Even so, he might have kept clear o' women. Ees, gentlemen. That's the effeck Molly had on the man. He fell for she, proper, but the experience only served to set him on to try his powers elsewhere. It seemed that he and she, unlike what do most times happen in such a case of hot infatuation, made each other a sort o' bet who could take the most scalps. Scandalous. A dreadful state of things. Then he'd come back and say: 'Ah, my dear, her ain't a patch on you'; and her'd say: 'Why, the man can't hold a candle to 'ee, boy'—or some such godless truck, I don't know, I'm sure.

Well, first of all, before matters took this here promiscuous turn, 'twas bad enough the open scandal of how Fred Bowhay do carry on with Harry Salter's wive. Takin' her out in his car, seen to the Pictures in to Mewmouth, makin' a show

o' themselves at every stall of Whelp Hill Fair; then Molly makin' wise she was off to see her folks for the week-end, and old Miss Lumsden witnessed her and Fred Bowhay, so clear as carrots, in to the Theatre Royal to Plymouth. I tell 'ee, the matter couldn't be passed over. Make things worse, Harry Salter was actually workin' on the estate, haulin', and suchlike, under the orders of Fred Bowhay. A difficult position, gentlemen, you'll allow. But Harry was a man of principle. His heart was broke half across, to see how matters lay. He'd spoke to Molly, and a lot o' good that done. And now, like a good man and true, he spoke to Fred Bowhay, and was laughed at for his pains.

'If you can't keep your wive,' says Fred Bowhay, 'you don't deserve her. Damme if I'd go snivellin' to the man she fancied better than she fancied me.'

'I don't snivel, Bowhay,' says Harry, very quiet. 'I come to ask you, as a honest neighbour, to leave my wive be. 'Tis me she married,' he says.

'Ees, and why she married you, Lord only knows,' says Bowhay. 'You must have flaunted your great wealth and your high prospecks in the poor maid's face,' he says, 'till her was fool enough to believe they was substitute for a man of spirit—even while they lasted.'

'Those be cruel words, Fred Bowhay,' says poor Harry. 'Think shame, to mock a man with his misfortunes.'

'Think shame you can't keep your own wive,' calls Fred Bowhay after him. 'And go to hell for another,' he shouts down the road.

Now, you'd have thought that to have a bad, callous reputation of this kind, to be known for a man of no faith nor trust, would have been a setback to Fred Bowhay, and put the women of the countryside against en. That shows how little you know of women, gentlemen. Nothin' o' the-sort! In fack, the very opposite. The more girls and women Fred Bowhay do make light work of, the more comes forward and says 'Serve me likewise.' Oh, I'm not insinuatn' anything against the morals of the ladies hereabouts. No—dear—no. Women be the same, all the world over, and three parts o' they what falls to one of these here Don Junes falls 'cause they've heard about t'others. Not but what Fred

wasn't a bold, handsome sort of a chap, with a deep hard voice on him, and a way of making wise 'twas you and he laughin' at all the rest of the world. Oh ees. He knew his way about.

Well, Harry had said his say, and a deputation of neighbours had said theirs, pretty forcible; but you can't do much when a man be manager over half the chaps what be critickizing of him. Besides, Molly was well on the rampage now, and several of the more influential chaps in the parish had forfeited their right to say aught about the matter. Oh, I tell 'ee, 'twas a brave old mix-muddle.

Nex' thing Harry doed, 'twas very brave and honourable, and all that sort, I don't doubt, but to my mind 'twas so much foolishness, which same it turned out to be. Harry waited till Fred should come down to The Happy Dick one Saturday night, and there, before all be'olders, he stepped forward, slapped Fred's face, and challenged en to a fight.

Fred put down his drink, took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and give Harry one of the biggest hidings I've ever seen. He didn't fight cruel, nor punish the man more than he need, but after about a minute and a half 'twas clear to all that *that* was no way to get satisfaction out of Fred Bowhay, and the sooner Harry Salter was took off home by his friends, the better. 'Twas hard to make the man see sense, though. He kep' staggerin' up to be at his enemy again, till Fred gived en one to the jaw, dropped en for good, and put a end to the affair.

Harry was in bed a couple of days after that there, and didn't get very kindly nursin', I don't reckon. Nex' thing, and last re-source, was a appeal to Mr. Smethwick's nephew. But would you believe the wickedness? Fred—and Molly—had been there first, and Molly had quite fascinated the young gentleman. 'Twas easy to make out how her was served bad at home, and how Fred was savin' her lot from a cruel, mingey sort of a husband, who had attacked him at the pub, and so forth—you know. The tale wouldn't suffer for they two tellin' of it, and Molly knew how to make a eye and show a leg, Lord forgive me if I say more than I should. Anyhow, poor Harry didn't get no satisfaction from Mr. Holland. No satisfaction at all.

Well, that left the brave pair struttin' the countryside; and what happened with the women started to happen with the men. So soon as Molly's ill fame got abroad—well, there come to be more and more reason for it, and more and more men what looked sheepish when any one should speak of Harry Salter and his affairs. Poor Harry! There was no way out for en, and, what was worse, his pride was broke. Some of his friends come round and offered for to send a round robin to Mr. Smethwick's nephew, or even to Mr. Smethwick himself: but Harry says 'No,' he says. 'Leave her bide. I can't keep her,' he says. 'Bowhay's right. Let him take her. Maybe,' he says, 'if us had had a child, now——'

But would Molly go to the man, open and above board? No, souls, not a bit of her. She continued to bide on in poor Harry's house, and carry on worse than ever with all and sundry. Show a leg! Gentlemen, if she'd had so many legs as a emmet, she'd have showed 'em all. From a sizeable bit of a flirt her'd come to be so brassy a bit o' goods as ever a man looked after twice. So, at last, seein' how things was goin', and seein' what fools they'd all been—for there's naught like seein' a man make a fool of hisself to bring a woman to her senses—the women of the place got together, and re-solved to settle Fred Bowhay's 'ash once and for good. It says a world for their sense, they never so much as thought of doin' anything to Molly. No. Women's cunnin', once they starts. They wasn't goin' to waste no powder and shot on the likes of she.

A proper old mothers' meetin' they had of it, and kep' all so dark none of us didn't so much as know they'd met till 'twas all over. Now, as it 'appened, there was a big red-headed maid down to Pengelly's mill cottage about this time, what had just come to the place with her pappy. He'd been took sudden a widower, and she'd come to keep house for en. Very strikin' her was, in build and feature: and 'twas known to the company that Bowhay had called in there, passin' by one day, and made free talk with the maid. Her had give him more than he bargained for, too, bein' a self-respectin' sort of a maid, and havin' served a bit in a tobacco shop in to Mewmouth, where her got used to hannelin' men, like. But Fred, o' course, couldn't believe that no

one could hold out against en: and a touch o' spirit, as he called it, only served to sharpen his appetite. What was his pleasure, then, one mornin', to get a note from this here red-headed maid, same purpose her'd expeck to see en that evenin' in the woodshed at the back of the cottage. 'Then,' the letter ended up, 'I shall see what sort of a man you be.'

'Oh-ha-ha,' laughs Fred Bowhay to Molly, you may be sure. 'Her'll soon know what sort of a man I be.'

So her did, begad, and others too. When Fred got to the woodshed, 'twas all in darkness.

'Where be you, my dear,' he whispers, stummelin' in over the logs and such.

'Here we be, Fred darlin',' calls a score o' women, what was hid all about.

'What the 'ell——' cried Fred, and turns to run; but he didn't get far.

Well, I don't hardly like to tell 'ee all they did to that man, for when women have lost their shame of each other, and forgot their sect, like, there's pretty well nothin' they won't do. Be-as-'twill, they had the man in there upwards of a hour; and first thing we know'd of it was a gurt noise an' ullabaloo comin' down the village street, women singin' and cheerin' and ringin' a handbell.

Every soul turned out then, I promise 'ee, and wonderful was the sight what met their eyes. There was a band o' women marchin', and at the head of 'em the red-headed maid from Pengelly's cottage was wheelin' summat in a gurt big wheelbarrow. 'Twasn't very easy to see what the summat was, for its head were hid in a bucket, tied on like a pig's snout, and the top part of it were tarred and feathered, and the bottom part of it, so far as could be seen, were wearin' a petticoat. What's more, 'twas bound up sittin' posture, with its hands in front of its knees. On the front of the barrow, tied on with a string to the bucket what the object had over its head, hanged a placard: 'To Molly Salter, from the women of the neighbourhood, with compliments,' it said. And, would you believe it, they took that there poor shiverin' object right up to Molly's door! Us all folleyed in a crowd. Us couldn't do aught else. My sakes-alive, but I'll never forget Molly Salter's face, when she come out on the doorstep.

'Here, *Missis* Salter,' calls out one of the women. 'Here's our leavin's. You'm welcome to 'em.'

With a heave of her gurt strong arms, the red-headed maid give the wheelbarrow a twist, and tip' out what was left of Fred Bowhay at Molly Salter's feet.

'Twas hard on poor Harry, o' course. He went away up country somewhere, takin' Molly with him. Bowhay? Oh, he went quick enough. In another direction, too. I don't know what sort of a interview they two had after Fred was deposited to her door, but it don't seem to have brought 'em any closer, like.

Ees. Quite a decent manager us got in the place now. What's more, if 'tis true what everybody be sayin', he'm courtin' the red-headed maid. Eh? Would you fancy such a strong, de-termined young woman as that, eh? Oh-ha-ha! Take care her wouldn't serve 'ee same as her served Fred Bowhay! Ah, but never mind. Ten to one, her'll be so gentle as a dove with the right man.

Oh well, there you be, gentlemen. That's me tale, and I'm obliged to 'ee. Thank 'ee, sir. Thank 'ee. You'm very welcome. Welcome, I'm sure. Thank 'ee.

XIV

THE WHITE COTTAGE

AS soon as they reached the lane running down to the loch, the two men were delivered abruptly from the pressure and leaping buffets of the wind. The relief was extraordinary. The young doctor, who had been labouring, head down, bent almost double, forcing each thigh forward as against a weight of water, suddenly felt his body become light and irresponsible. It wanted to leave the ground altogether. A single bound should have been enough to take him to the loch side. Then, in immediate reaction, his limbs felt shaky and weak. They were not properly under control. He took a couple of long, uncertain strides, and caught up on his

companion: but he, his anxiety urging him on, plunged at a shambling run into the darkness.

'Hey! half a minute.' The doctor stumbled and stopped. Even through the noise of the storm, he somehow heard the other man stop.

'Sorry,' he called, 'I can't see my way.'

The other was silent for a moment.

'Stand for a minute. Your eyes will get accustomed to it.'

I'm damned if they will, thought the doctor: but he was glad enough of a chance to get his breath. It was as if they had come into another world. The darkness was solid, rich as the smell of wet earth and dead leaves that came in breaths from the wood. Outside, on the moor, there had been light of a sort, which, penetrating the scud and lashing rain, enabled them to see one another and distinguish the road from the heather on either side. Here there was nothing but stillness and dark, while, overhead, and all around, came the crash of the gale and the threshing of trees in torment. It was like nothing the doctor had ever experienced. Looking up, he could now see, against a patch of sky, an agitated fringe of blackness. The tops of the trees were lashing wildly, while at the roots, where the two men were standing, there was peace.

His companion stirred impatiently, and the doctor, rousing himself, followed him. It was no use. The way grew darker as it ploughed deeper between the trees. The doctor could see nothing. He walked by faith for fifty yards or so, then tripped, and all but fell.

'It's no use,' he called. Then, as the other, impatient, stopped again, 'I'd better not break my leg, had I?'

He took a step forward, and almost bumped into his companion.

'Take hold of my coat.' The voice was more friendly 'Then you'll be all right.'

Meekly the doctor obeyed. A nice fool I must look, he reflected, as he walked along, holding on to his companion's coat tails: only, luckily, there was no one to see him, and it would be too dark, even if there were. He gave a chuckle, then cursed himself for want of consideration. Probably the man hadn't heard.

'You know,' he said, over the noise of the trees, 'this is a great change for me.'

'I'm sure.'

'I'm well accustomed to being called out at all times, of course, but it's along pavements, with plenty of lights, and a bobby to pass the time of night with at the street corner.'

'It must be a change indeed.'

The voice was courteous but constrained. I'm a brute to bother him, the doctor thought. All the same, he'll be the better for a talk. Sympathy lit in him, a small, warm flame.

'You mustn't worry,' he said. 'We'll be with her soon now.'

'It is the crossing I am thinking of,' the other said.

'You came over all right.'

'Aye. But the wind was mostly at our back. We shall have it against us. And the boat will be heavier.'

'I'd like to help,' said the doctor. 'But I oughtn't to do too much. I may want a steady hand, when we get there.'

The other did not answer at once.

'Och, you could not help,' he said. 'There are two of us. It would upset the rowing.'

The darkness seemed to part above them: the gap widened: and, with a last twist, the road arrived beside the loch. They felt the wind again, but it was not nearly so strong as on the moor.

'Why,' the doctor exclaimed. 'It's much calmer down here.'

'Wait,' said the other grimly. 'We are sheltered.'

'It's lighter, anyway,' said the doctor, and, relieved from the pressure of gale and darkness, he walked along cheerfully beside his companion. 'How far is it to the boat?'

'A quarter of a mile.'

There was a silence. The doctor spoke again.

'Is yours the cottage one can see right across the other side of the loch, at the foot of the mountain?'

'Aye.'

'I was looking at it the other day, when I was coming back from seeing to one of the children at the farm up on the hill there.'

'John Mackenzie's.'

'Yes, that's the place. I looked over, and I thought to myself, That's an out of the way place to live.'

'It is so.'

'Aren't you very lonely, all by yourselves?'

'We have one neighbour. He is waiting for us. He helped me row over.'

'Is he married?'

'No, he is a single man.'

The young doctor peered sideways at his companion. He judged him to be nearer forty than thirty. Well spoken, an educated voice; but then, all the people of this district spoke well and musically. What on earth could persuade a man to live in such a God-forsaken spot? The tiny white cottage, huddled at the foot of the huge green wall of mountain, seemed a very symbol of loneliness.

'You know,' he said, 'it would be better, when these events are coming on, to move your wife in to some more accessible place.'

'Move my wife?' The voice was shocked. '*Move her?*'

'Yes. Bring her in to the village. To some neighbour's. Surely some one would be only too glad to give her a room.'

'Och,' said the other, recovering speech. 'She would never go. She would never think of being anywhere but in her own house. And who would do the work?'

'Some one will have to do it now.'

'Och, yes, but—'

Evidently I've put my foot in it, thought the doctor. Some local taboo, I suppose. It's all damned fine: but here have I got to go a wild-goose chase, get soaked to the skin, drowned maybe . . .

'You know,' he said. 'It might in certain circumstances be very dangerous to wait out there. You might be obliged to move her. In which case it would be more sensible to move her while she is well than afterwards.'

The other was silent for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was distant.

'As I was telling you, doctor, it has come upon her suddenly. We were not expecting it for a week or ten days.'

The doctor cursed his inexperience. Now he had gone and offended the poor chap. Frightened him too, most likely. He kicked at the road, trying to be angry with his companion, but succeeding only in being angrier with himself.

It was lighter. The scud overhead was vaguely luminous.

'The moon is trying to get through.'

'Aye, maybe.'

They turned a corner, and saw dim shapes ahead of them which emerged as a rock, a small tree, and a jetty. The waves of the loch were slapping and splashing against the rock. There was more wind.

A figure rose from the gloom, and confronted them. A voice asked a question in Gaelic.

'Aye.'

'Good evening,' said the doctor, stepping forward. He felt the need to assert himself.

'Good evening.'

The neighbour's voice suggested that the doctor was a regrettable necessity, something impersonal, like medicine or sheep dip, which had to be secured, but was otherwise negligible. Without further word, he turned and led the way down to the boat.

It was not so dark by the loch's edge, and the young doctor noted once more the uncanny power of water to collect more light than there appeared to be in the sky. Even as he thought it, a sudden gust of wind made him stagger, and a shower of drops were flung in his face.

'There's plenty of wind, after all,' he said ruefully, to no one in particular.

'Aye. There is wind enough.'

The man who had fetched him was in the boat, feeling for something. The other stood on the jetty.

'Where shall I sit?' The doctor was anxious to show that he was not altogether a novice. 'In the bows?'

There was a brief exchange of Gaelic.

'No. The waves are too big. They would come inside the boat.'

'As you like. You'll want some weight in the bows, though, won't you, if we are heading into it?'

There was a silence. They don't like being told their business, thought the doctor. I don't care. I'm not going to have them treating me as a child. He planted his feet firmly against the wind, and leaned back, tilting up his face to the rain. The drops came, not steadily, but like a series of sharp, indignant backhanders. He heard a scraping noise, stooped, peered, and saw that his companions were putting a large stone in the bows.

'Now, doctor. If you will be so kind.'

With the rain in his face, it was not easy to judge distance. As he hesitated, a hand reached up and grasped his. Angrily, he leaped down. The boat bounced and swayed. He all but fell over sideways, but the hand held him firm.

'Steady. There you are.'

The doctor sat on the wet thwart. He stowed his bag safely underneath, hunched up his shoulders, pulled the ends of his mackintosh down over his knees, and braced himself to endure worse discomfort. That the crossing could be actively dangerous he did not believe. He had all a townsman's faith in the inevitability of getting where he wanted. His job was the important thing: it had to be done. He could not really conceive of any valid obstacle. He had never before failed to reach a case, and he was not going to fail now.

The boat was away. The shore, a vague blackness, receded, became a blur, and was lost. They were adrift in a grey universe, troubled, faintly luminous. The boat bobbed and bounced, the water slapped and gurgled. It was not so bad.

Then the rain, which had eased, was suddenly intensified. A squall took the boat, spinning her round like a shell. The rain came in sheets: the doctor had to bend his head to breathe. Three separate cold rivulets ran down his chest. A moment later, they were no longer distinguishable. He was soaked to the skin. He gasped, and looked up. The huddled figures before him were fighting to get the boat straight on her course. Grimly, doggedly, they dug their oars deep into the water, and with short, chopping strokes brought her round. A wave came and sat in the doctor's lap. He noticed it, with faint surprise.

Then, suddenly, things were easier. They were pulling left, to correct the error in their course. The boat was steadier. The rowers took longer strokes. The doctor stirred from his cramped posture, and felt his clothes move cold and wet against him.

'That's better,' he ventured.

'Aye. We are under the lee of the island.'

Peering to his right, the doctor thought he could see, not so much a shape, as an obstruction to the prevailing luminous greyness. It spread, and grew darker. Indefinitely, but perceptibly, the wind leaned away from them, and was lost overhead. The dark blur was suddenly very near. There was a sharp word from the man in the bow, and the boat jerked away at an angle.

The water was almost calm here. All around, the wind could be heard, with a crash like that of a perpetually breaking wave, but here there was the illusion of stillness. For the first time, the doctor could hear the hiss and tingle of rain upon the water.

The gloom began to recede upon the right. It was getting lighter. Something happened in the air above their heads. The rain whispered and stopped.

'Are we clearing the point of the island?'

'Aye. And the squall is passing.'

The doctor stared ahead. Light was growing in the sky, vague, sickly, like a mildewy stain. As it spread, the shape of the island darkened, and the figures in the boat took on firm outlines. Turning his head, the doctor saw that they were quite close to the island. As he stared, the dark outline metamorphosed into a rock, a streak of dirty whitish sand, a rising bank, and the stems of trees. All came to ghastly life as he watched. Upon the tree stems, the rocks, the dripping bushes appeared odd mucous-like patches of pallor, so shame-faced that he did not at first recognize them as light. Puzzled as to their cause, he looked up, and saw the weak shape of the moon, like a false florin, fleeing sideways through an unhealthy haze that thinned as he watched. His eyes upon the reeling disc, he saw it pale, blur, darken, reappear: there was suddenly a great torn hole in the sky to the right of it, pricked by a star: something glittered beyond the bows: and the

moon leaped out, laughing in triumphant brilliance. The diseased nightmare island had vanished, and in its place stood shining rock, winking jewelled bushes, and pine stems splashed with silver.

But he was given no time to admire the island. Hastily the two pulled across a little bay to the further point, whence they could see the strip of water, three-quarters of a mile wide, which they had yet to cross. The sky was open now, but it would not be so for long. Away to the north-west was a vague upheaved mass, like a sheep's fleece, its edges combed and fluffed to an incredible softness. It looked motionless: yet, even as one watched, it was larger, and higher up in the sky.

The doctor looked over at the mountain. The summit was drowned in cloud, lit on the top to woolly loveliness, but dark and forbidding underneath. The cloud reached to half-way down. At the foot, tiny, forlorn, could just be seen the white face of the cottage.

Between it and them lay a belt of beaten silver. Close to them, where the water was moderately calm, its motion could be seen. Near at hand were ripples. Farther out, the water felt the edges of the wind, and a current streamed sideways, thoughtful, with dark stipplings, in shape like a partly opened fan. Beyond that, where the waves leaped, all appeared static, a frozen band of tumbled silver crests. Only by the closest peering could he detect that it was in angry movement.

'We must make a run for it.'

'We will not get there before it, Allan,' said the neighbour.

'We must try. The next squall may be longer.'

And, looking, the doctor saw that the fleecy cloud had risen enormously, and its mass was darker.

Settling down, the two men rowed hard, and drove the boat through the brief stretch of quiet water. The trees on the lee side of the island had been still. Now, before the boat felt it, they caught the wind, rolling and tossing in an agitation that, from below, seemed meaningless. Another few seconds, and the first whiff caught the boat. The water ruffled, and came at them sideways. The doctor felt cold

jets of air squirt down his neck, reminding him that his underclothes were a sodden mass. He shifted on his seat, and looked ahead. The wind stiffened at each second. They would have to bear to the right, he saw, in order to take the waves bow on, and not be carried out of their course. Then they might——

Bump! With a shock so sudden he thought they had run on a rock, the first wave butted them under the bows. Another, and another: the doctor's knees were jerked upwards, the breath was shot from his lungs. He caught at the gunwale, and leaned forward, to avoid being tilted over on his back.

At first, it seemed impossible that the boat should live, let alone that she should make progress. To row was like trying to force the boat over broken ice, or up the side of a cottage. Yet the two maniacs went on pulling. The boat did not go down. Buffeted, jolted, bumped, the doctor tried to protect himself, to keep his bottom on the seat, to learn a rhythm which would allow him to breathe. Grasping the gunwale on each side, he tensed his muscles, dug in his heels, and tried by main force to press his buttocks down on the leaping thwart. It was so fantastically difficult that he almost laughed. Ride her, cowboy! A second, professional thought warned him swiftly that, at this rate, when they got to the cottage, his arms would be shaking and aching, and he would be as weak as a cat. Perhaps it would be better to relax, and—a biff that made him bite his tongue supplied the answer, and he sat, in mingled alarm and rage, his eyes filled with tears of pain.

When they cleared, he forcibly detached his attention from the boat, and tried to look ahead. It was not easy, for the boat reared like a bucking horse, and, as soon as he caught sight of the silvery expanse, the bodies of the rowers were thrown up at the sky and blotted it out. In fragmentary glimpses, he managed to see that, till it came near the boat, the surface had the same stiff, immobile look as from the island. At a distance, the crests of the waves were like bright, silver cabbages. Then, nearer, they seemed, all together, to lean forward, till suddenly one would leave the rest, swell, and fling itself with disproportionate fury at the

boat. Some broke ahead, were split by the bow's blackness, and creamed by in rushing magnificence. Others got underneath the boat, threw up their heads, and seemed to knock her right up into the air, so that it was with a bruised astonishment that he found himself still on the surface at all. It was all mad, too mad to think about. The doctor gave up trying, and was gradually buffeted into a trance. He was aware of his surroundings, but of little else. The violent motion ceased to be unpleasant. He was emptied of all emotion, all reflection. The dazzling belt of water leaped and fell, leaped and fell.

Abruptly he came to himself. There was a change, a new force. Something was pressing against his right side, against the whole boat. He looked around, feeling the clothes wet against his neck. The water ahead was not so bright: it seemed to frown as he watched. Wind—more wind—blowing hard. He looked up, and saw with consternation that the woolly cloud had grown inconceivably, and was towering above them. No longer did it look soft and innocent. Even its edge, where the moon caught it, was an angry blur, with a smudge of pallor. Then the boat started to leap madly from side to side, like a terrified beast on a tether. A wave, ugly, grey, seen only an instant before its attack, broke over and into the bows. The boat struggled, trembled, shook itself, and rose heavily. Before it could recover, it had shipped water from two lesser waves.

Steadying himself with one hand, the doctor leaned forward, and groped beneath the seat.

'To your right, man. Your *right*.'

He nodded, fumbled on the other side, found a pan, and, wedging himself as best he could, began to bale. The next few minutes were a painful dream. Somehow he managed to hold on, and keep one hand free for baling. He baled frantically. The first thing that had really frightened him was that stunned, sluggish feel of the boat as she tried to recover from the weight of water. While she was buoyant, tossing up and down like a cork, she was distinct from the water, victimized, but capable. But that slow wounded rolling—although his arm felt red hot, as if it was coming off at the shoulder, he kept the pan flying. He saw, in a shaft

of moonlight, the almost continuous stream of water splayed out in the air.

Next time he noticed anything, he had stopped baling. It was dark. It was raining. A sickly ghost of moonlight retreated softly on their left, and was sucked up in grey, deepening darkness. But the boat was steadier. The waves were lessening. The wild jolting was over.

He decided to speak. It was an effort to recall how one did it: what muscles one moved. He opened his mouth twice before words came.

'What has happened?'

A spent voice gasped an answer.

'We are nearly there. Under . . . the shelter . . . the mountain.'

The doctor was a mere heap of limbs and clothes. He sat upright, because that was the position into which his body had subsided. As, with each tired stroke of the oars, the water grew calmer, his interest returned. He remembered who he was, and the errand on which he was bound. God, he thought, I hope it's an easy case. If it's a forc., I'm done.

They were nearing the shore. The rain was falling heavily. Once again he could hear the tingle of the drops upon the water. A few seconds more, and the bow bumped violently.

'Hullo.'

'We are forgetting ourselves.'

'It would not do to sink her now.'

The shaken voices were trying to jest. The strain was over. All they knew was that they were safe. With each instant, sense was returning. The doctor felt for his bag. It was still there. He grasped it, but, as he tried to rise, the boat rocked violently, and he sat down again. Allan had jumped out, and could be heard stumbling off inland.

Cautiously, the doctor got up.

'He is very anxious,' he said, as he took the other man's hand, and stepped out on what felt like a rough stone slip.

'He has good reason. His wife is not too young, and it is the first child.'

'Is it, by damn,' said the doctor, with a chill at the heart.

He followed his companion up the slip, and felt his feet strike soft upon grass.

'It is all most unfortunate, and Nurse Ferguson not free to come. Will you be able for it, do you think?' The neighbour had evidently not much confidence in a locum.

Somehow, the question restored the doctor's good humour.

'I hope so,' he said. 'I've had a good many.'

'Humph!' said the other, and added: 'It is a misfortune, her to be taken like this. Dr. Macdonald expected to be back from his holiday in good time for her.'

The doctor grinned in the darkness. He respected this dour loyalty.

'He's an old man,' he said. 'How does he like trips of this sort?'

'Och,' said the other. 'He is well used to them. He has lived his life here.'

The doctor looked up, and saw a faint light ahead. It was almost at once obscured, and the figure of Allan emerged from the gloom and grasped his arm.

'God be praised,' he cried. 'She is well. Nothing has happened yet. You must forgive me, doctor, for running away from you like that. I could not be easy in my mind till I had a word with her. I did not wait. I only looked in at the door to ask.'

'Of course,' said the doctor. He had already forgotten the crossing and his discomfort. Professional enthusiasm rose, a thin, intense warmth in his chilled body.

'Well.' The neighbour halted. 'I will be going now.'

'Bless you, man.' Allan grasped his arm. 'Bless you.'

'Och, it is nothing. I will stand by, in the morning, in case you want me.'

'Bless you.' They shook hands forcibly. 'Now, doctor.'

The doctor, plodding stiffly in his sodden clothes, followed Allan to the cottage. He squelched with every step. Allan opened the door, and plunged in first. When the doctor came in, put down his bag, and started to peel off his dripping macintosh, Allan was bending over the bed in the corner.

'How are you, my darling? What a fearsome long wait for you. Oh, I am so thankful!'

'Was it terrible rough?' murmured the woman's voice. Then, as she touched his sleeve: 'Och, Allan, you are drenched! You are drenched to the skin. Take off your clothes this instant. Doctor——' she raised herself, peering past the lamp into the gloom. 'Make him take off his wet clothes.'

The doctor grinned.

'Why,' said Allan, reprovingly, 'the doctor is in no better case. Indeed, he is worse. We had the exercise of rowing to keep us warm. He must be perished.'

'To be sure,' she cried. 'Doctor, what will you be thinking of me! Get the doctor a dram. Give him a g——' She lay back suddenly, and groaned.

'My love!'

Allan bent over her in agony.

'It is all right.' Her face was shining with sweat in the lamplight. She forced a smile. 'Go on, now. Pour the doctor a good dram, and take one yourself.'

'All in good time,' said the doctor good-humouredly. 'Let's have a look first, to see how things are. Excuse my costume,' he added, for he had peeled off coat and waistcoat. 'I don't want to drip over you more than I can help.'

'Can I be of any use?'

'You can hold the lamp.'

Allan held it, with averted head, biting his lip. Once the doctor asked him to bring it nearer. There was silence, save for a gentle question or two, and the sound of the woman catching her breath. Once she moaned, causing Allan to tremble and shake the lamp.

The doctor stood up. A flood of relief and satisfaction warmed him.

'All is quite as it should be,' he announced. 'Your wife is a wonderful woman, Mr. —— By the way, I don't even know your name.'

'M'Kechnie. Allan M'Kechnie. You think it will be all right, doctor?'

His eagerness was pathetic. Obviously a man of strong reserve, he was utterly beaten down by his wife's ordeal.

'I do,' said the doctor. 'And now—what was that I heard about a dram?'

'Is there time?'

'Time and to spare. Nothing will happen for three or four hours yet.'

'Of course there's time, you silly man,' scolded his wife affectionately.

'In any case,' said the doctor. 'I prescribe a dram for us both.' He wriggled. 'I suppose you haven't a change of clothes you could lend me?'

Even in the lamplight, he could see Allan flush.

'I have only the one besides this, doctor, and it got wet yesterday, going to kirk. I doubt it is dry yet.'

'It is not dry,' said his wife.

There was a silence.

'I can't stay in these,' said the doctor, half to himself.

'Allan,' said his wife: and, as he bent over her, a whispered argument followed.

'Och, no.'

'Och, *yes*.'

'My wife says, would you mind putting on one of my nightshirts? They are good warm flannel.'

'The very thing,' cried the doctor. 'I'll put my things by the fire, and, by the time they're wanted, they'll be dry. Or dry enough.'

He went over to the fire, turned his back on the bed, and began to pull off the wet, clinging garments. Allan, standing carefully between him and the bed, handed him the night-shirt. Made of thick flannel, it was large as a tent.

'Here is a blanket, in case you feel the cold.'

'Good.' The doctor draped it round his waist like a kilt. 'Unprofessional,' he declared, looking down himself, 'but effective.'

He turned to Allan, who had begun to strip.

'What will you do?'

'I have my nightshirt too.'

'But no kilt?'

'No kilt.'

'I've pinched the only one. That's not fair.'

Allan hesitated. He flushed again. 'I thought, for the present, as nothing is happening——'

'Yes?'

'I might get into the bed.'

'An excellent idea. You get in and keep warm. I'll sit by the fire.'

'Will you be warm enough?'

'Grand.'

Without paying him any more attention, the doctor pulled a chair to the fire, and methodically spread out his dripping clothes upon the hearth. There was, he noted with approval, a large kettle beside the fire. Presently he heard a creaking noise. Allan was cautiously getting into bed.

A long silence followed. For the first time since he had come in, the doctor became aware of the gale. He could hear it high overhead, rushing over the mountain, swooping on the loch in thunderous gusts. Its noise was like a memory. The cottage was sheltered, under the huge shoulder of the mountain.

He glanced around the room. It seemed to be the only room in the cottage. It did not take long to see that the M'Kechnies were poor. The furniture was of the plainest. Even the chair on which he sat was rickety. There was not much crockery on the dresser. Poor devils, he thought; stuck out in this God-forsaken place, getting a living the best way they can. The place was clean, though. After some of the homes he had visited, it was a paradise.

He stirred, and shivered. In spite of fire and dram, he was not too warm. He had got thoroughly chilled in the boat. To avoid sitting still, he rose, fetched his bag, and began to get everything out. It was too soon yet to do any more. He straightened up, and swung his arms across his chest.

There was a whispering in the bed. It sounded as if the wife was saying something which shocked Allan. She persisted. There was a silence. Then she spoke.

'Doctor.'

'Yes?'

'Why don't you come into the bed, and keep yourself warm? There is plenty of room there beside Allan.'

The doctor hesitated only for a second.

'An excellent suggestion,' he said. 'Thank you, Mrs. M'Kechnie, I will.'

He shed his improvised kilt, and climbed in beside Allan. There was a short, embarrassed silence, which the doctor determined to break.

'Hark at that wind,' he said. 'We are better off here than out on the loch, eh?'

'Indeed we are.' Allan's deep voice rumbled, surprisingly close to his ear. 'We shall always be grateful to you for coming, doctor.'

'Nonsense. It's all a new experience to me, Mrs. M'Kechnie. I come from the town. My usual night-call is to take a bus or a tram and walk a mile among tenements and things.'

'I could never live in the city,' declared Mrs. M'Kechnie. The words came with an effort. The doctor raised himself on one elbow.

'Turn over on your side,' he commanded. 'And get your husband to rub your back. Can you get at her? Is there room? Or shall I get out?'

'No, there is room.'

'Rub hard,' said the doctor. 'You won't hurt her.'

He lay down again, making as much room as he could. Allan's back was pressed against his side and he felt it move in steady rhythmic effort. Presently Mrs. M'Kechnie whispered something, and the rubbing ceased. She and Allan lay on their backs again.

The doctor stared at the ceiling, which loomed a faint orange in the glow of the fire. The whisky crawled in his brain. He felt light again, as if his body were rising from the bed. His mind, detached and alert, perceived thoughts and images with stereoscopic clearness. How simple life was, when one approached it sensibly! He remembered half a dozen obscene stories in which this was the central situation, husband, wife, and stranger in the same bed. From what deep springs of life those stories rose. How earthy, how sane and direct their laughter, based on the eternal verities of human nature. Yet how remote were they from the present situation. Remote, because the very place was remote. Here, in this lost cottage, cut off from the world by gale and raging waters, there were no conventions, no precedents. A situation existed by its own right, and was met on its own

terms. They were not bound here by any of the rules that regulated ordinary human contact, because there was nothing to which the rules could refer. Nothing could be less scandalous than this situation, which would be so wildly scandalous once it was taken across to the other side of the water. He smiled into the darkness, feeling in his heart a great compassion for the follies of mankind. Cautious, idolatrous, they made rules, they tried to pin down and systematize the unique flying moment. Poor, labouring fools! Right living was not obedience to rule: it was a balance, renewed each instant, like a tightrope walker's, a tension between opposites. Here, for a moment, in this bed, in this cottage, in this tiny focus of life, beneath storm and towering sky, was wisdom. Men did not possess wisdom. It possessed them. Like a light, it flickered here and there over the vast dark mass of humanity, illumining briefly every now and then a single understanding. Here, for the moment, it possessed him; and by its light he gave thanks, and loved all men.

Then he must have fallen asleep, for the next thing he knew was that Allan was shaking his arm. Startled, he sat upright, and in a flash remembered.

'Doctor. Doctor.'

'Right.'

He was out of bed with a bound. A minute later he was telling Allan to boil the kettle.

'Half a minute.' The doctor stood by, in the grey filtering daylight, wiping his hands upon a towel. He had just finished bathing the baby. Allan was on his knees by the hearth. 'You'd better let me do that. I'm a great cook. You mightn't believe it, but I am.'

'Och, doctor.' Allan's hands were still shaking, and his voice not under proper control. 'You have done your share of work. It is my turn now.'

'I want my breakfast right,' said the doctor, grinning at him. 'It doesn't matter who cooks it.'

The crofter looked up at him, with an answering smile.

'I feel useless enough, as it is,' he said. 'You must not humiliate me any more, doctor. At least, I can prepare breakfast for you in my own house.'

'I'm not so sure that you can.' They laughed at one another affectionately, like old friends. The doctor laid down the towel. 'I'll help you, anyway.'

He went to the cupboard, and rummaged.

'What have we here? Coffee essence, or I'm seeing cross-eyed. You know, M'Kechnie, you are a man of rare discernment. I made sure I should have to take tea for my breakfast: and, to be frank with you, I abominate tea for my breakfast.'

Allan's face beamed with gratification.

'We always like to have coffee, for a special occasion.'

'Well, if this isn't a special occasion, I'd like to know what is. And, talking of that—as it's such a *very* special occasion—do you think I might have a spot of what killed Auntie, just to keep me going till breakfast is ready?'

'A spot of—what killed——?'

Suddenly comprehending, Allan scrambled to his feet.

'Och, what has come to me. I am forgetting myself altogether.'

He poured out the whisky with shaking hand, one tumbler for the doctor, another for himself.

'We'll both be the better for it,' declared the doctor. 'And—a much more important matter—we must drink his lordship's health.'

'We must indeed. And his mother's.'

'And his mother's. You know, you're a lucky man, M'Kechnie. She was grand. I'm not saying it to flatter you. She was grand.'

Allan, his eyes wet, looked lovingly over at his wife. She lay asleep, the beatitude of her face visible even in that twilight.

He could not speak.

'Here's to her,' said the doctor, raising his glass. They drank deeply. 'And here's to her son. He will be worthy of her.'

'He will.'

Allan's faith shone in his eyes. He did not hope. He knew.

'He will grow up fine and strong, and be a credit to his parents.'

'He will.'

The doctor leaned back his head. He felt the whisky seize on his empty stomach, and let his mind soar on the winds of prophecy.

'He will be clever,' he declared, waving his glass, 'clever and able-minded.'

'Aye.' Allan nodded hard. 'I plan a great education for him. He shall have the best schooling.'

'And carry all before him.'

'He shall go to the University.'

'And win scholarships by the bucketful. Oh, he'll be a great man.'

They drank again.

'And here's to you, M'Kechnie. Health and prosperity.'

'And here is to you, doctor. I wish I could say what I am feeling.'

'Nonsense.'

The doctor laid a hand on his shoulder, then put down the glass. A dim shadow moved on the window. Allan started forward.

'It is Donald. He has come to know——'

He stumbled to the door, and the doctor heard him outside telling his neighbour the good news.

'Come in, come in.'

'Och no. I could not disturb Mistress M'Kechnie. I will come in later on.'

Yawning, the doctor stooped over the hearth, and began to prepare breakfast. He felt suddenly tired and sleepy.

'He would not come in,' said Allan, returning and shutting the door. 'He will come back presently.'

'Breakfast,' said the doctor sleepily: and, forgetful of his boast, he sat back, smiling and blinking, to watch the other get it ready.

Three hours later, they took leave of one another at the loch side. Donald had come, and had been persuaded to take a peep at mother and child—he held his breath, and drew back, as if they might explode in his face. Now he was going to row the doctor back. The storm had gone. It was a lovely, sunny morning, with small, soft clouds flying high

up in a clean sky. There was still some wind, and the loch, its ruffled surface straining away from them, was the colour of gunmetal.

‘I’ll send the nurse over to-day.’

‘Will she be free yet, do you think?’

‘Oh yes. I’ll take on, if she isn’t. And I’ll come over myself again to-morrow afternoon.’

‘Och, doctor, don’t trouble yourself.’

Courtesy struggled with natural solicitude in his voice.

‘No trouble, man. It’s a pleasure—besides being my plain duty. Mind you, she’ll be right as rain. But I’ll come.’

‘It is good of you, doctor. It is indeed.’

‘On one condition,’ said the doctor.

He yawned as he spoke.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I’ll come on one condition.’

‘What is that?’

‘That you give me at least two cups of that splendid coffee.’

‘Indeed, doctor, but you shall have a kettleful.’

They stopped, and shook hands. Donald, his austere countenance a little relaxed, looked on.

‘Well, doctor, good-bye, and God bless you.’

‘God bless you, old man.’

They wrung one another’s hands in silence. The doctor suddenly found his eyes full of tears. Hardly able to see where he was going, he clambered into the boat. Donald pulled away. The doctor screwed round to wave. Allan stood for a minute, waving, watching the boat. When the doctor looked again, he had turned, and was making his way quickly back towards the cottage. Its whitewashed face shone, small and innocent, in the morning sun.

TUESDAY AFTERNOON

'I SAY, you chaps, *do* buck up. We'll never get started at this rate.'

The round, ingenuous face of the assistant master was two shades redder than usual. He stood in the midst of the cloak-room, surrounded by a crowd of noisy small boys who were making only the most leisurely preparations for their walk. Singing, shouting, and laughing, they gathered in groups in the various corners of the room, or ragged about generally. To Christopher Banks, exhorting and beseeching, they paid no attention whatever.

A couple, one boy chasing another to regain his cap, cannoned into the master, whereupon the thief actually seized him and used him as a buttress against his pursuer. Presented with a personal cause for wrath, Banks seized each by the shoulder and shook them.

'Buck up, now, you chaps! Buck up at once! Do you hear me, Fenwick? Get your things on immediately, or I shall give you some lines.'

Fenwick, a thin, fair boy with a girlish appearance which belied his temperament, squirmed loose and clasped his shoulder in feigned anguish.

'Oh, sir, you *hurt* me! You're so strong, sir. You're so terribly strong. You don't realize your own strength, sir.'

'Get out with you,' retorted Banks, tempted to grin in spite of himself. 'Get out with you. Nonsense.'

The boy nodded, looking at him with mischievous eyes.

'It's a fact, sir. I shall be bruised black and blue. It's my bath night, too. I'll do my best to hide the awful mark, sir, because I should simply *hate* to get you into trouble.'

'Get out,' said Banks happily; then, realizing that the din had become appalling, he started rushing about the room again. If he didn't get them out soon, old Sniffington would hear, and perhaps come down. Sniffington was not the

head-master's real name. It was Banks's own version of it, which he privately thought very witty.

'Come on, you chaps. Come ON! Any one who isn't ready in two minutes, I'll give him five lines.'

'S-i-r.' Several voices were raised in mock protest, and one added: 'Oh, sir, you are fierce. You do bully us, sir.'

'Bully you?' Eighteen months at St. Columb's had quite failed to teach Banks not to snap at the bait that was offered him. 'Bully you? Good Lord, boy, you don't know what bullying means. I'm much too easy-going, that's what's wrong with me. Much too—*Henderson!* Stop that infernal din and get your boots on immediately. You'll have all the less time for your game, if you don't buck up,' he added to the assembly at large.

A boy named Fane came up to him and took his arm.

'We're nearly ready now, sir,' he said soothingly. Before Banks could reply, another boy came and pushed Fane aside.

'Here, you get out. I've bagged his right arm.'

Immediately a third boy seized Banks's left arm, putting his whole weight upon it and nearly toppling the master over.

'And bags I his left. You get out, slimy Fane,' he added gratuitously.

This was too much, even for the amiable Banks.

'Get out, both of you,' he cried indignantly, shaking himself free. 'What on earth do you think I am? A parcel? What's that you said?' he went on fiercely, as one of the dispossessed muttered under his breath.

'Nothing, sir.'

'Yes, you did. I distinctly heard you.'

The boy stood smiling, with a kind of furtive insolence, glancing left and right at his companions. So intent was Banks that he did not notice the room had become quiet.

'I insist on knowing what you said.'

'Listeners hear no good of themselves,' chanted a voice somewhere behind him, and Banks wheeled round on the instant.

'Who said that?'

'Who said what, sir?'

'You know perfectly well. You heard as well as I did.'

'Heard, sir?'

As he stood undecided, a hand timidly touched his arm. It was the boy Fane.

'Shall we start, sir? Every one's ready now.'

Banks gave a snort of relief.

'Yes, for goodness' sake let's start. Now then, no bargaining there, Higgins. Shaddock and Ponsonby, lead.'

'Oh, sir, but you said——'

'Shaddock and Ponsonby, lead.'

Through the open door Banks had caught a glimpse of the headmaster at the far end of the passage. The boys had seen him too, and there ensued an orderly exit which much gratified Banks.

'May I walk with you, sir?' asked Fane timidly.

'Certainly. Very nice of you.'

'And I, sir?'

'Yes. No, Lawson, I can't have three. How often have I told you. Only one on each side. Sorry, but the others got here first,' he added, with that habitual blend of good nature and weakness which was his undoing a dozen times a day.

The playing fields of St. Columb's were nearly three miles distant, and were visited on four days a week—Mondays, Fridays, and the two half holidays—in a special tram reserved for the school. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, between afternoon school and tea, the boys walked a mile and a half through the town to Devil's Point. There, close beside the sea, was a public playground, untenanted at that hour, a space where the hillside had been quarried out and made flat to form a small football or cricket ground. It had no grass; its turf was hard and poor. There were no goalposts. A pair of overcoats or a pile of caps at either end did duty for the goals. The touch-line was the quarry wall on one side, and the footpath close to the sea's edge on the other.

The game suffered from a number of restrictions. In the first place, the boys did not change their clothes for it. In the second, they played in their ordinary boots. Furthermore, they were forbidden to barge each other or tackle vigorously, because of the hard ground and the danger of crashing into the quarry wall. There was no 'out' on the quarry side, and a real part of the tactics of this special game

lay in kicking the ball against the wall so that it should rebound to the advantage of the player's side. The boys liked the game well enough in the earlier stages of the term, but later on, as the afternoons grew darker and the time shorter, they became bored with it, and resented the long walk each way, for the sake of what, by December, was only twenty minutes' play.

On Thursdays, the headmaster went himself, but on Tuesdays, Banks had to take the boys alone. He had begun by liking it, but now, of all the week's tasks, he looked forward to it the least. He had had bad luck lately. Things had gone wrong. A boy had been barged into the quarry wall and had cut his head. ('But I don't understand, Mr. Banks. It is a definite rule that boys are not allowed to barge one another during the game.') A football had been lost, kicked across the path into the sea. ('Very unfortunate, indeed, Mr. Banks. In all my previous experience, I have never known such a thing occur.') Then there had been that complaint from a parent, who had seen the boys walking five abreast on the pavement instead of in the correct two by two, and had told the headmaster that they were ill-manneredly crowding people off into the gutter.

Altogether, things had not been too good lately, with the result that Tuesday afternoon had got upon Christopher Banks's nerves, and he was thankful when his charges were safely home, and it was over.

'Have you always been a schoolmaster, sir?'

Recalled to himself, Banks looked down at his favourite.

'No, Fane, no. I haven't.'

'What were you before you were one, sir?'

Banks did not answer at once. Looking along the line of boys, he saw that it was beginning to straggle and spread out. That was another danger. If they were not watched, the leaders would set a furious pace, get out of touch with the main body, and, once they were safely round a corner out of sight, go into a sweet shop and buy illegal provender.

He had deliberately chosen Shaddock and Ponsonby to-day, because as a rule they could be trusted: but already—yes, and there in the middle were three or four boys walking together.

'Wait a minute.'

He detached himself from his two companions and began to run along the line on the outside of the pavement.

'Get in, there, get *in*,' he exhorted as he ran. 'How do you think people are going to get past if you straggle all over the pavement? Get on the *inside*, I tell you.'

Mechanically they obeyed, giving him barely a glance, going on uninterrupted with their conversations. Panting, he reached the group of delinquents in the middle, two couples absorbedly talking together and amalgamated for the purpose.

'What I don't see is,' one was saying, 'why we shouldn't talk about it.'

'Yes, that's what I don't understand.'

'What on earth do you fellows think you're doing, sprawling all over the pavement? Will you get into twos properly?' Banks gave the arm of the outermost a sharp tap with his walking-stick. 'Get in, O'Reilly. It's always you. If I've told you once, I've told you a dozen times.'

'Ow, sir!'

'Ow, sir, be blowed. I'll give you Ow, sir.'

'But you *hurt* me, sir.'

'Not half so much as I'll hurt you in a minute.'

'You're not supposed to hit us with your stick, sir. My father would be very angry. He'd attend in person at the school, sir.'

'He'll attend in person at the inquest, if you don't shut up.'

A laugh went up. The victim grinned sulkily, still rubbing his arm.

And Banks, well content, forgetting all about the leaders, fell back and waited for the tail of the procession to catch up on him.

'Well,' he said smiling, and fell in with Fane and his companion. 'Now then, what were we talking about?'

'You were telling us about before you became a school-master, sir.'

A shadow crossed Banks's face. His momentary contentment left him.

'Yes,' he said gloomily. 'I've been several things in my time, and a failure at every one.'

'Oh no, sir.'

Fane pressed his arm affectionately, looking up at him.

'Yes, Fane, old boy; a failure at every one. It's no good my pretending that I wasn't, because I was. I read for the Church for a bit, after I came down from Cambridge—I wasn't much good there either, I might as well tell you. I mean, I had a grand time, but I d—— jolly nearly missed my degree. (Get *in* there, Higgins. Walk on the *inside*! Can't you understand English?) Yes, I read for the Church for a bit, but somehow I didn't think it was going to suit me, and the head of the theological college didn't think I was going to suit it.'

'I can't quite imagine you as a clergyman, sir.'

'Neither could I. That was the trouble. So I went to my governor, and told him that was no good. He was frightfully sick, because he's a parson himself. In fact, he wouldn't have sent me to Cambridge if he hadn't thought I'd go in for the Church afterwards. Then one of my uncles used a bit of influence to get me a job in a business in town.'

Banks broke off. He had always the power of hypnotizing himself with his own speech or thoughts, and memories of town came up so vividly before his mind that he forgot his surroundings in contemplation of them. The boy beside him waited for a minute or so, and then gently pulled his arm.

'What happened then, sir? Didn't you like the business?'

'Eh, what? The business? It wasn't bad, you know, but it was rather dull.' Banks gave a half laugh, and turned red. 'The fact is, the business didn't like me.'

There was an embarrassed pause. Fane's quick perceptions saw that he had touched on a painful subject.

'Then I tried a job in a bank, and I was no good at that either. Never had a head for figures.'

'That's why you don't teach maths, I expect, sir, isn't it?'

'That's right. Heaven help any one I had to teach maths to.'

He relapsed into silence. Nice little chap, Fane. The other chap, Osborne, was all right too. All the same, it was silly of him to go talking about himself like this. Banks heaved a sigh. Every day he did at least half a dozen impulsive things which he regretted as soon as they were done.

Oh well, what did it matter? It would all come out in the wash. All the same a hundred years hence.

His eye was caught by the behaviour of three or four boys in front. They were larking about, playing tig on the pavement, and as he watched he saw one of them, helpless with laughter, cannon into a lady and barely stop to apologize. That odious little lout Swinford. Uttering an inarticulate cry, Banks ran along the pavement and reached the group.

'What on earth do you chaps think you're doing, assing about all over the pavement like this? Swinford, did you see that you bumped into that lady? Swinford! do you hear what I say?'

Still laughing, the boy took no notice, keeping his eyes still on his pursuer, who was making threatening signs to him from behind Banks's back. It was not insolence; it was worse. The boy completely ignored him.

'SWINFORD! Do you hear what I say?'

And, raising his stick, he caught the boy a sharp crack on the thigh.

The effect was dramatic. Uttering a howl, the boy seized his injured leg, and began to limp convulsively about the pavement.

'Ow!' he blubbered. 'Ow, ow, ow!'

The others gathered round him with every appearance of sympathy.

'Don't say a word to him,' stormed Banks. 'He hasn't had half he deserves, the beastly ill-mannered little lout, barging into ladies on the pavement.'

'That's no reason for you to hit me as hard as you can with your beastly great stick,' wailed the victim, his power of speech returning.

'Get on, get on at once.' Turning round, his anger shrunk to the usual misgiving, Banks shooed at the other boys, who had gathered round in a circle and were obstructing the whole pavement, causing passers-by, with wondering, hostile glances, to step off into the road. 'Get on, will you? Walk properly two by two. And you, Swinford, stop that ridiculous fuss and get on at once.'

To his surprise, the boy obeyed, though limping and still clutching his thigh.

'I'll tell my father as soon as I get home,' he whimpered.

'Tell your nannie, too, while you're about it. And your little sisters.'

And the harassed master fell back, once more rejoining his faithful escort.

It was not far now to the Point, thank goodness. Five minutes more, and they were out of the streets and walking along the path above the rocks. Here the two-by-two rule was relaxed. A grey sea was running in the estuary, and a light cruiser steamed slowly past the Point, making for the Sound and the open sea. The sight of her distracted the boys' attention from all else. They ran along to the wall, uttering cries which blended with those of the gulls that wheeled above. Banks turned to Fane and Osborne.

'Wouldn't you like to run on and have a look too?'

'No, sir,' answered Fane. 'We can see perfectly well from here. Can't we, Osborne?'

A ray of warmth shone in Banks's heart, and he smiled. Then anxiety once more assaulted him. That beastly Swinford. He was still limping, even with the cruiser to look at. Supposing he had really hurt him? Suppose the boy did tell his father? That would never do. George Swinford, owner of a big general stores near the dockyard, was an influential parent, and an ugly one to offend. Oh, damn it all, there was no peace at this job, no peace whatever. He'd better get out of it: get out, before he was shot out. Perhaps he'd solved the problem already, he thought grimly. If George Swinford cut up rough, old Sniffington was quite capable of giving a chap the push.

'Come on, you chaps, come on. Can't stand there the whole afternoon. We haven't much time for the game as it is.'

'Oh, sir, isn't she a beauty?'

'Sir, don't you wish you were on board?'

'No, I don't. I should be beastly sick.'

'Oh, sir! You *are* a landlubber.'

'Landlubber yourself. Come on, I want to pick up sides. Come on. Who are the captains? Come on. Everybody round me here. Who are the captains, I say? Edgington, pick up, or I shall depose you and choose some one else. Now, who'll be blues, and who'll be whites?'

'Blues,' was natural enough, for the school cap was blue; but 'whites' was a courtesy title, its members simply turning their caps inside out.

Gathering the boys into some semblance of order, Banks produced half a crown and tossed it.

'Heads.'

'Tails!'

'Whites on my right, blues on my left. Blues pick first. Now then, Edgington, your pick.'

'Higgins.'

'Martin.'

'Edwards.'

'Spottiswoode.'

The two captains bid against one another briskly to begin with, snapping up the best performers. Then they began to hesitate.

'I'll—have——' The captain looked round undecidedly upon the bunch remaining, while his subordinates nudged him and whispered advice in his ear.

'Leave him *alone*, Bateson. It's his choice, not yours.'

'I'll have—Merryweather.'

'Curse,' replied his ungrateful choice, taking off his cap and reversing it. 'I wanted to be on Dawson's side.'

'Well, you're on mine, so jolly well play up, see?'

'Who shall I have?' The other captain addressed the air. 'I can't have Brigg: he stinks. Fane's no good, he walks about on the touch-line dreaming. I don't want——'

'Pick up,' roared Banks. 'Pick up, or I'll choose for you.'

At last they were started. Trotting about with a whistle, Banks had a few minutes' peace. He did not use the whistle much. It was best, he had learned from experience, to leave the boys undisturbed. Their natural interest in the game had taken their attention from him, and the less he reminded them of his presence, the better. He hung about on the seaward side of the ground, keeping a perfunctory eye on the game and looking out across the water at the cruiser. She was slewing round, getting clear of the river mouth into the open water. What must it be like on board? He might have been all right in the navy. Lucky devils, anyway, getting clear. For a moment he half wished himself on

board, away from St. Columb's and all to do with it. It was no life for a man, nurse-maiding a pack of brats. It had its consolations, but that was just the trouble: they *were* consolations. If you had a proper, decent sort of a life, you wouldn't need consoling. The good bits of life at St. Columb's were just the bits you got to yourself, the bits that weren't actively beastly.

Reminded of his fear, he looked for the boy Swinford. He was still limping, confound him. Hullo, there was some sort of a dispute. Banks walked across. It settled itself before his arrival. Swinford passed, and Banks smiled at him. The boy looked away and scowled. Still sulking, the little brute. Very well, let him.

'Offside, offside!'

'It wasn't.'

'Yes it was. Miles offside.'

'Sir, wasn't that offside?'

'I don't know,' said Banks. 'I didn't see.'

'Now then, ref, where's your eyes?'

The parody of a cry from the local professional ground raised a laugh. About to protest, Banks thought better of it.

'Here, give me the ball. I'll bounce it. That will be fair to all concerned.'

'No, it won't, sir. I had a clear goal.'

'Oo, you dirty liar. You were miles offside.'

'No I wasn't.'

'I should have saved it, anyhow,' interrupted the goalkeeper disdainfully.

'Shut up!' roared Banks. 'Shut up. Now, stand back.'

He bounced the ball, and the tide of the game once more eddied about him.

For ten minutes the game went on, and then Banks called half time. It was getting dark. There'd probably be rain before night. Clouds came rolling up from the low Cornish hills. The sea was ruffling stiffly in the Sound.

From time to time Banks's eye nervously picked out Swinford. The boy was still limping a little, but taking more part in the game. Presently, as he stood near the half-way line, the ball rolled out to him. No one was near.

'Now then, Swinford, there's your chance. Shoot, man, shoot!'

Pulling himself together, steadying himself, the boy took a shot at goal. The kick was of academic perfection, marred only by the fact that Swinford, who was a little to one side, kicked straight in front of him. Beginning low, the ball rose above the players, then dropped steeply a yard or so to the right of the goal.

'Oh, good SHOT, sir, good SHOT!' Banks broke into loud shouts of ecstasy. 'A lovely shot.'

The goalkeeper made a gesture of derision.

'What's the fuss, sir? It went wide.'

'Never mind,' cried Banks. 'It was a lovely kick, from all that distance out. I've seldom seen a better.'

Swinford's face broke into an unwilling smile at the praise. He began to play up fiercely. His limp disappeared.

Presently, catching Banks's eye, he returned the master's smile.

An immense relief flooded Banks's heart. That was all right, then, thank the Lord. He'd managed to square the boy. That was all right. The boy wouldn't tell his father now. Whew, what a relief!

Beaming, he began to rush about, encouraging everybody, blowing enormous blasts upon his whistle, blasts of which no one took any notice. Good humour, like a sudden infection, fell upon all the boys. Laughing, they scurried and scrambled about, giving up all pretence of playing the game seriously. In a moment Banks had joined in with them. Usually, such an action would have roused howls of protest, but to-day they only laughed, and laughed more when presently, declaring that he could not give his favours to one side only, he took off his cloth cap and put it on inside out to play upon the other. When the time came to return, every one was quite breathless from exercise and laughter. Glowing with satisfaction, Banks looked round upon his flock.

'Now then, chaps, homeward bound. Same leaders.'

There was no bother on the homeward walk. Happily tired, the boys rambled peacefully along. The musical chatter of their voices echoed off the high wall, and, when they came to the street, they went in orderly file along

the inside of the pavement without a word from their shepherd.

The street lamps were lit. Lights were twinkling everywhere, the town's cheerful response to the menace of the west. Banks, walking along with a boy on each arm, suddenly felt that life was not so bad after all. Tuesday afternoon was nearly over. He had a pleasant evening before him. He and old Laplace, the French beak, were going to have a nice little spot of dinner and then go to the Cosmo to see the boxing. It would be a good evening, and Wednesday was a half holiday, besides being an easy morning. Oh, there was something to be said for the life after all. The boys—they were natural enough, friendly enough, when one got on the right side of them. They weren't the little devils they seemed sometimes. He was on the right side of them now. Well, he'd jolly well stay there; and Christopher Banks resolved, by no means for the first time in his life, that whatever had happened in the past, he'd make a success of *this* job, anyway.

XVI

SNOW CAPS

ONE late November afternoon two tramps were walking along a road in the West Highlands. The road, which had been running west across an open moor, was turning south and dipping towards a valley, on the far side of which rose a chain of huge snow-covered mountains. The scene was of an extraordinary magnificence. The late autumn colouring of bracken and heather swept away from a fierce rust-red in the foreground to a softness that in the valley became bloom, and finally, where the first frosty mists began to rise, was vague as a light thrown upon smoke. The bases of the mountains were dim and shadowed. The snow caps, shining clear in the afternoon sun, did not seem to belong to them at all, but to hang unsupported in the clear upper air. They seemed much nearer than the mountains.

But the tramps were not interested in the scene. They walked fast, one a little ahead of the other. The man in front, stocky, black bearded, without an overcoat, shuffled along head down, his hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets. The other, taller, with a weak, unhappy face and a straggling moustache, was at pains to keep up with him. His long tattered overcoat flapped about his knees as he pursued, and he kept up a fitful stream of remonstrance, directed towards the back of his companion's neck.

'Why won't you listen to reason?' he began again. 'You don't want the boy. He's no manner of use to you. You don't concern yourself with him.'

The other hunched his shoulders, muttered, and quickened his pace.

'You don't want him,' persisted the taller man. 'It's no use pretending you do.' Then, his note becoming even more plaintive, 'What's the hurry, Barney? Why can't you stop a bit, and listen to reason?'

Without slackening his pace, the other half turned and barked over his shoulder.

'I got my natural affections, haven't I? You don't deny that?'

'You don't show 'em much, then. There's not much sign of 'em as I can see.'

Barney stopped so abruptly that his pursuer almost cannoned into him.

'Oh, I don't, don't I?' he said unpleasantly.

The taller man recoiled a step. Intimidated, he still stuck to his guns.

'No, you don't,' he repeated. 'At least I can't say as I've noticed it. Except when I say I want him. That's the only times.'

'You want him, eh? And what right in the wide world have you got to want him, Ted Bossom? What do you want him *for*?'

'What do I want him *for*?' repeated the other stupidly. 'I don't want him *for* anything. That is to say, nothing particular.'

'Then why do you want him at all?' And before Ted had time to answer, he turned and began to walk on. 'She's put you up to this,' he said over his shoulder.

'No, but look here, Barney——'

'She's put you up to it, I say.'

'Well,' expostulated Ted, 'what if she has? She and me wants to settle down. What have you got to say against that? You and her are finished, anyway.'

'Are we?' sneered Barney. 'You ask her about one evening six weeks ago, then. One Saturday evening, say to her.'

Ted swallowed unhappily.

'Well even so,' he said, 'I mean as a regular thing. You and she haven't been regular, not for years now.'

'You're a nice pattern of a domestic man yourself, aren't you?'

'Well, I go the road, I admit. But I never go far. I stick to this here country. I'm never away for more than three weeks at a time.'

'Oh, you're a holy wonder, you are. We all know that. Ted Bossom, the domestic man. The prop of the homestead.'

For a minute or so they shuffled on in silence. The sun, catching a bush covered with berries by the side of the road, lit it with so brilliant a colour that even Ted, labouring with his problem, noticed it.

'You might listen to reason, Barney. It's a good offer I'm making you: a honest offer. She's behind me with it, yes, of course she is, that's only natural. I want to do what I can for her and the boy.'

'My boy—and don't you forget it.'

'Of course I don't forget it. I shouldn't be offering for him if he wasn't yours, should I?'

Barney stopped.

'Look here. When we go past a farm house—are you the man the dog barks at, or am I?'

Then, as the unhappy Ted made no answer, 'Very well, then,' he said; and walked on more resolutely than before.

Looking at the back of the thick neck before him, with its ledge of greasy hair falling over the coat collar, Ted felt hatred blaze up in his soul. Licking his lips, he looked at a large round stone by the roadside. If only he had the courage to pick it up, run after Barney, and bang it on his head! Bang him till he either yelled for mercy and promised to do as he

and Meg required, or, better, was silenced for ever. Better, because Barney was not of the kind that keeps a promise. Tricky, dirty Irishman! No heart, no conscience. Oh, it would be good to do him in, to avenge years of insult and hardship in a few smashing, well-aimed blows. But to do a man in was a hanging matter. Besides, it took strength and bravery, and Ted was neither strong nor brave. He thought too much, he saw too much. That's what spoiled him; and he had sense to know it. It was the Barneys of this world, who didn't think or feel or see beyond their noses, that came off best.

Rounding a corner, the two tramps saw a thin column of smoke rising straight into the frosty air, and realized that they were not alone. In a little hollow by the roadside another tramp, a large fellow with a bullet head, a big belly, and a red stubble that could hardly be called a beard, was sitting on the ground beside a fire. Ranged round about him were two or three cooking pots, and between his spraddling knees he had spread a clean white napkin. Evidently his preparations for a meal were complete, for, at the moment he looked up and saw the travellers, he was opening his clasp knife. Over a corner of the fire a kettle hung from a tripod made of freshly-cut green sticks.

As soon as he beheld Barney and Ted, the red-bearded man threw back his head and bellowed a hospitable greeting.

'Come along, mates,' he cried. 'You're just in time for tea. Come along. I got more than I want here, and once it's cooked, 'addick don't keep.'

Barney stopped short suspiciously. An invitation so alien from his own nature filled him with distrust. Ted paused irresolute too.

'Come along, mates,' urged the red-bearded man, seeing them hesitate. 'Don't be bashful. There's plenty for all. Look.'

The appetising smell, borne suddenly towards them on a breath of frosty air, was irresistible. With muttered thanks, they found themselves places by the fire. Barney, however, even while he accepted the generous portion of fish their host cut them, remained aloof, looking over him and his preparations with a cold eye.

'Mind that,' he said, nodding towards the tripod from which hung the kettle. 'It's rickety.'

The red-bearded man gave it a careless glance.

'It'll do,' he said. 'Now then, mates, all set? Fall to then, and here's luck to us all. I'll make the tea presently. Ah,' he continued, taking a huge mouthful, 'that's a good 'addick. I knew it was.'

Barney was moved to a faint interest. 'Where did you get it?' he asked.

'Aha,' said the other joyously. 'That's telling! Ask me no questions, mate, and I'll tell you no lies. I got one or two good friends hereabouts, among the women, you understand.' He gave an enormous wink, leaned forward, and prodded Ted in the ribs with his knife. 'I may not be much to look at, but I know my way about.' He looked from one to another of them, and then addressed Barney.

'And where might you be going, mate?' he inquired.

Barney grinned sourly.

'Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies,' he parodied.

The red-bearded man looked surprised, then, recognizing the riposte, threw back his head and guffawed.

'Tit for tat, eh? Well, but no offence, mate; where are both you boys going?'

Ted was opening his mouth to reply, when Barney said: 'I might be going to Jamaica, or I might be going to Elgin, but as a matter of fact, I'm going to neither.'

'Well,' said the red-bearded man, 'you're an oyster of a chap, I must say. A regular oyster. There's nothing to be got out of you at all.'

A malicious smile broke over Barney's face. 'Were you ever,' he inquired, 'in the Union at Loughlinstown, in the County Dublin?'

The red-bearded man stared.

'No,' he answered. 'I was not.'

'It's well for you,' answered Barney, and applied himself vigorously to his meal. The red-bearded man stared at him, stared at Ted, then slowly shook his head.

'Beats me,' he said with a smile. 'All the same, mates, where are you bound? For Fort William?'

'You mind your own business,' said Barney, 'and we'll mind ours.'

'Struth,' said the red-bearded man, in some indignation. 'You are a cross, independent sort of a chap, I must say, to answer a man crooked when you're sharing his tea.'

'You asked me to share it, didn't you? I never asked you.'

'Well, you *are* a chap! You *are* a chap, and no mistake! Why can't you answer a man fair and reasonable when he asks you a question?'

Something, whether the comfort of the meal or Barney's churlishness, released a pent-up spring in Ted.

'Reasonable?' he said bitterly, to the red-bearded man. 'It's not much good to talk to him of reason. I've been trying to get him to listen to reason the whole bloody afternoon, and you might as well talk to a stone.'

The red-bearded man was all interest. He leaned forward.

'You have, have you? What was it, an argument you were having? Or was you making him a proposition of some sort?'

'I was making him a proposition, and an uncommon good proposition at that. All right, Barney, it's all very well for you to pull your face crooked. But it was a good proposition, and one you've no right to.'

'No right, haven't I?' Barney sneered. 'You'll be saying I've no right to my own boy next. What about the order the magistrate made out, eh? What do you say to that? No right!' And he spat contemptuously into the fire.

The red-bearded man began to nod his head portentously up and down. He rounded his lips as if he were going to whistle.

'Oho,' he said. 'I see. So that's the size of it, eh?'

'Yes.' Ted leaned forward eagerly. 'You see, I'm keeping company with the woman now, and she wants to settle down and have a proper undisturbed possession of the boy, and put him to school.' And in a few sentences he acquainted the red-bearded man with the whole story.

'Oho,' said the red-bearded man when he had finished. 'So that's the pedigree of it, is it? Well now, mates, you couldn't have done a better thing than to bring this matter

to me. I'm a large-minded man with a great experience of the world; and, as you will both allow, in this case I am a disinterested spectator. Now—shall I give you my verdict on the case?' He looked expectantly from one to the other. 'Shall I give you my verdict?'

'To hell with your verdict,' replied Barney.

The red-bearded man did not notice him. He fixed his eyes on Ted's, giving him a couple of almost imperceptible nods of encouragement.

'Yes,' Ted answered. 'I'd be very glad to have your verdict. I'm sure we both would. An outsider's opinion, eh, Barney? Impartial, like.'

'Good,' said the red-bearded man. 'Well, boys, my verdict and considered opinion of the case is that Ted's proposition is reasonable *and* fair *and* generous, and that Barney can't do no better than accept it. Now then. What do you say to that?'

Ted looked at Barney. The Irishman's eyes had narrowed, but he gave no sign. A fresh wave of hatred rose in Ted. You could never be sure what Barney was thinking, or what he was going to do.

'It's a very good verdict,' Ted faltered. 'And a fair one, so it seems to me.'

'Good.' The red-bearded man turned to Barney. 'And what do you say?'

'I say,' answered Barney unexpectedly, 'you can take your bloody verdict and—— What's more if ever I want a ginger-chinned jelly-belly's advice on my private affairs, I'll ask for it.'

The red-bearded man's face slowly crimsoned. Carefully he put down his food upon the napkin, laid his knife beside it, and rose to his feet.

'You clear out of here,' he said majestically. 'I've bore enough of you. I've bore you with the patience of Job himself, while you sat there and ate my meat and answered me crooked. Now you can get out. See?'

Barney sat where he was. His eyes had creased to slits.

'Oh,' he said. 'I can get out, can I?'

'Yes,' said the red-bearded man with emphasis. 'You can get out, before I kick you out.'

Ted watched the quarrel with mixed feelings. A part of him rejoiced to see any one threaten Barney, a part of him was afraid, for Barney was an ugly customer in a fight, and a part of him reflected miserably on the need to keep on terms with Barney till the bargain Meg so sorely needed was struck.

Still Barney did not move. The red-bearded man advanced and stood over him.

'Get out,' he commanded. 'Get up and get out.' And he made as if to kick Barney.

With a sudden movement Barney sprang up and towards his opponent. Quick as lightning, he thrust one foot behind the red-bearded man's and flung himself hard against his body, jabbing wickedly in his belly as he did so. Taken by surprise, the red-bearded man uttered a loud grunt and staggered backwards, tripping over the food and falling with a thud close beside the fire. As he fell, Ted observed with horror that his shoulder grazed one leg of the tripod from which the kettle was hanging. Slowly, delicately, the tripod swung to one side, leaned, and collapsed. For one eternal instant the kettle hung motionless. Then it tilted forwards, and a stream bright as molten silver leaped from its spout full over the face and head of the recumbent figure.

With a movement of terror, Ted turned and looked across to the snowy mountains marking the boundary of a valley that had suddenly become too narrow and too loud. He stared at them, shaking, his hands involuntarily lifted to his face, his mind a blank of horror. Barney was the first of the two to recover his wits. Stooping quickly, he grabbed up all the food, huddled it into the napkin, and ran, catching Ted by the arm as he did so.

'Come on,' he muttered. 'Out of here, quick.'

With one last glance at the screaming, bellowing figure that rolled and kicked convulsively among the ashes, Ted followed. Barney looked quickly up and down the road. By good fortune, it was empty. Then he started off at a shambling run down the hill, Ted at his heels.

For a while the two doubled along, with no sound but their own labouring breath and the clatter of their boots upon the road. Night was rising from the valley. The sun

had gone down; the light was failing, and the shape of objects by the roadside was uncertain till one came close upon them. The highest snow cap opposite was still flushed with faintest rose, but, even as it caught and held Ted's eye, the flush faded, and the peak took on the infinite cold of those about it.

Suddenly Barney stopped running and fell to a quick, shambling walk.

'It was an accident,' he panted. 'I never meant to knock him against the kettle.'

Ted made no reply. He needed all his breath: besides, his mind was beginning to work.

'Silly ——!' went on Barney, whose face was still yellow from fear. 'What did he want to go interfering with me for?' He stopped, coughed, spat, then uttered a brutal snigger. 'He won't be able to identify us, anyway.'

'He may be able to describe us, though,' said Ted.

Barney scowled, and his lower lip worked in and out.

'It was an accident, anyway,' he said. 'You can witness that.'

'I *can*,' said Ted with emphasis.

Barney turned and gave him a malevolent glance.

'What do you mean—you *can*?'

'What I say,' replied Ted. 'I can. If I choose to,' he added, marvelling at his own daring.

'If you choose? Look here, Ted Bossom——'

'There's no call to get excited,' said Ted. 'I'm not going to have you a bullying of me, neither. I can give witness that will clear you, and I may, if you make it worth my while.'

Barney stood still. He clenched his fist.

'Blackmail, eh?' he said, and his voice had an ugly edge. 'You try and do me dirty, and I'll——'

'Ssh.' Ted stopped him peremptorily, and pointed.

Looking round, he saw a figure looming in the dusk. They had come within half a mile of the village that straggled on the near slope of the valley.

Without a word, the two tramps began to walk on.

The figure turned out to be a labourer returning from his work. He gave them a civil good night, to which they

responded. After they had gone a few yards, Barney turned and looked after him.

'Christ!' he muttered. 'If he's going on up the road . . .'

Before they had time to speculate further, however, the man set their minds at rest. They heard his boots leave the road and take a track across the moorland.

Barney stopped again.

'That's all right,' he said.

'Yes, but,' said Ted, 'it may not be all right for long. It's only a matter of time till they find him. Look here, Barney, it's no use you fighting me. We two have got to stick together now. You do what I want, and I'll stand by you thick and thin. I swear it.'

'Well—what do you want?'

Ted fumbled in his pocket, his hands shaking in his eagerness.

'Just sign your name on this here bit of paper, that's all.'

'Sign my name? What for?'

'Saying as how you make the boy over to me, and his mother, legal and true, and hold no more claim for him.'

'I'll see you in hell,' began Barney slowly, when more footsteps were heard coming along the road.

'Come on,' urged Ted, seeing him hesitate. 'Here's a pencil.'

'All right,' growled Barney. 'Let's see the bloody thing.' He took it and held it up to catch the last of the light, screwing up his eyes.

'I can't see what it says.'

'That's all it says, I promise you. Here, hurry up and sign.'

'And you'll stick by me and keep your word?'

'I will. I'd be afraid not to,' added Ted, with a sickly grin.

Barney hesitated a second more.

'Very well,' he growled. 'Give me the pencil.'

'There. Sign it there, over the stamp.'

'What the hell has it got a stamp for?'

''Twouldn't be good and legal if it hadn't a stamp,' explained Ted, who had once seen a receipt made out. 'Here, steady it against the brim of my hat.'

Snatching the hat, Barney affixed his signature.

'There,' he growled, handing back pencil, hat and document. Ted took it with a relief that was almost incredulity.

'That's good,' he said, stowing away the precious document and hurrying on. 'That's good. Now I'll bear any witness you like, Barney. I'm glad you seen reason. I'm real glad. You acted very reasonable. I hoped you would.'

'Shut your trap,' hissed Barney.

He hurried on without a word, and Ted, following, had much ado not to laugh aloud. For a few minutes his exaltation persisted, leaping up in waves. Then it weakened, and he tried desperately to urge the waves on, so that they should cover a memory that was like a sore spot at the back of his mind; a memory of something horrible left behind by the roadside, a blind, moaning thing, shivering in the cold of night. With all his forces he tried to turn his mind away from it, to think of the joy of Meg, and the secure times ahead of him: but he could not. His triumph evaporated like breath on the frozen air, and he grew more and more unhappy as he walked along.

XVII

THE FORT

'ARE you done, Dermot?'

'Yes, thank you, Aunt Patricia.'

'Very well then. You may say your grace and get down, if you like.'

Dermot did like. He said his grace silently, with bowed head, slipped off the chair, and went round to the big sea window. The bay was calm: it sparkled sleepily. The long coast and the mountains basked and beamed in a haze of sunshine. Even nature seemed to have taken on the somnolence of Sunday afternoon. Dermot contemplated the scene, then turned.

'Uncle Ben.'

'Yes, son?'

'When are we going to start?'

'Ah well, son, not yet for a while. Sure——'

'I knew we shouldn't start *yet*,' said Dermot hastily. The last thing he wanted was to appear exacting or tiresome. 'I only wanted to know when, so that I could be ready.'

'Well.' Uncle Ben pulled out his fat gold watch. 'Suppose now, we were to start at about a quarter or twenty after three. Say twenty after.'

'At twenty past three. Very well, Uncle Ben.'

'What would you like to do till then, Dermot pet?' asked Aunt Patricia.

'I'd like to go out into the garden. Might I get the drawing things out of the billiard-room?'

'Certainly you might. You know where they are kept, don't you?'

'Yes, thank you, Aunt Patricia. In the left-hand drawer under the bookcase.'

'That's right, then, son.'

Dermot closed the dining-room door carefully behind him, and went down the wide staircase. Arriving at the billiard-room, he entered on tiptoe. On a Sunday it seemed almost wicked to come into the billiard-room at all. The windows were shut, the blinds half down. The room was hot and airless, with a stale faint smell of last night's tobacco smoke. Dermot gave an awe-struck glance at the billiard table, all secret and shrouded in its great yellow cover; then averted his eye, pulled open the stiff, heavy drawer, and took out the big drawing book, the indiarubber, and the long box of pencils. An instinct bade him hold his breath till he got to the door, which he closed hurriedly, with a gasp of relief. Uncle Ben and Aunt Patricia would have been surprised could they have known what an effect their Sabbatarian principles had upon a small boy who was desperately keen on billiards, and therefore impressed with a sense of sin which he dramatized into this fanatical aversion.

Settling himself comfortably on the edge of the lawn, Dermot opened the drawing book. It was labelled 'Alexandra College,' and had belonged to his cousin Eileen. For some

reason or other she had not got far in it. The first half-dozen pages contained very accurate and anatomical copies of figure drawings, all muscles and bulges, at which Dermot gazed with suitable reverence: the rest, except for the few pages he had already decorated, lay at his disposal. He chose a fair page, spread the book across his knees, wrinkled up his eyes in the sunlight, and decided to have another shot at drawing Killiney Bay.

It was very difficult to draw Killiney Bay. To begin with, there was too much of it. No expedient, short of drawing across both pages, could get it all in. Dermot did not like to do this, because it was hard to draw in close to the hinge, and some of the most interesting bits came just in the middle. Otherwise, one could begin at Bray Head, and, with a little crowding, get in both the Sugarloaves: but that part, though no picture of the bay could be complete without it, was all far away, and did not give the scope for detail drawing that the nearer part did. Dermot liked the detail drawing. On the other hand, the nearer view had, if anything, too much detail. It was boring to draw in all the houses on Vico Hill. By way of compromise, he began with the bathing place, thereby shearing off most of the houses, and at the same time including the road, the railway bridge, the little tunnel above White Rock, and Killiney Hill itself. He was so impatient to put the obelisk on the Hill that, the moment he had marked in the bathing place, he skipped right up to the top of his picture, and put it in, good and firm, at least three sizes too large.

So absorbed did he become that a hail from Uncle Ben took him altogether by surprise. He could have sworn that only ten minutes had passed since he came out. Jumping to his feet, art forgotten, he saw that Uncle Ben was not alone. A short, stooping figure had followed him from the house, a figure in a straw hat and a grey Norfolk suit: a plump figure with a red moustache and a round, cherubic face. Dermot stiffened, and gazed in grave hostility at the stranger.

'Are you ready, little son?' asked Uncle Ben. Then, turning: 'This is Mr. O'Hara, who is coming with us.'

Mr. O'Hara winked, held out his hand, and shook Dermot's very heartily.

'I'm pleased to meet ye,' he avowed. 'Faith, I am. I often heard your uncle speak of ye.'

'How do you do,' said Dermot. He might have added, he had often heard the family speak of Mr. O'Hara: but, considering the terms in which they spoke of him, this might not have been wise. Instead, he looked reproachfully at Uncle Ben. This, the long-planned, long-awaited excursion to the Fort on Dalkey Island, they were to have made together; and here was this stranger, this interloper, butting in to spoil it all.

But Uncle Ben either did not see or did not heed the glances.

'Leave those where they are,' he said, referring to the book and pencils. 'They'll take no harm. Come on, Primrose.'

The bearer of this unusual name said cheerfully, 'Right you are, McManus,' and proceeded to accompany them with short, bouncing steps down the shady road to the harbour. He talked continuously as they went, appealing at every second remark to Uncle Ben for corroboration, and, whenever he caught Dermot's eye, he winked and smiled and nodded with such vigour that Dermot, much embarrassed, looked in the opposite direction. Altogether, Primrose O'Hara was an astonishing phenomenon. Dermot had never seen his like. He took covert stock of him, noting his red round cheeks, the little roll of fat at the back of his neck, his little tight soft collar held with a pin, his bright green tie, his short fat legs, and his brown boots with the tabs sticking out at the back. He noticed, too, that Uncle Ben seemed to pay but little attention to Primrose's conversation, answering in the preoccupied, careless tone that Dermot's own questions provoked upon occasion.

The excitement of rousing old Billy, the boatman, of seeing him get the boat out, and then climbing aboard, put all else out of his mind. Once they were well out, however, Primrose proceeded to do such a comical series of tricks with his fingers, a handkerchief, and two dirty little balls of bread which, as he gleefully confided, he had secreted from the dinner table, that Dermot was unwillingly charmed, and had to revise his estimate. Encouraged by appreciation,

Primrose demonstrated a further series of accomplishments, putting his finger into his mouth and making a popping sound like a cork, clucking in imitation of a hen that has just laid an egg, making a noise like a saw, and finally bleating shrilly as any nanny-goat. After each trick he looked eagerly first at Dermot, then at Uncle Ben, to see how they liked it. At last he began to laugh excitedly on a high-pitched note, and dabble his fingers in the water over the side, till Uncle Ben said 'Easy, Primrose. Easy': whereupon he calmed down at once, and, except for an occasional giggle, kept silent until the boat nuzzled against the little weed-covered slip on the island.

Having moored the boat, the three took a narrow path up from the rocks, and proceeded along the grass past the fat Martello tower. First of all, Dermot insisted on going into the ruined chapel close to the tower. Knowing how old it was, he expected each year to be thrilled when he went in. This year the sense of disillusion was stronger than ever. Nettles grew in the narrow, roofless space. There were no carvings to be seen, nothing but a rude fireplace, and the building was clearly used by nobody except the goats, of which there was always a small army on the island. Sighing, Dermot took a hasty look round, and ran to rejoin the others.

'Well, son—did you see anything?'

'Nothing much.'

And he fell in behind Primrose, who, for no apparent reason, was taking great care to walk on the narrow goat track over the soft springy grass.

The fort lay at the extreme south end of the island. Why it should ever have been put there, and whom it was supposed to overawe, remained a mystery. True, it could command the Bay, but no more effectively than if it had been built on the mainland, where its defenders would not be liable to be marooned and cut off from their base, as here upon the island. It could hardly have been intended to keep the citizens of Dalkey in order, since the only part it really commanded was Vico Hill, the prosperous houses of which were highly unlikely to be the source of a revolution. Still, its thick, breast-high wall, broken by an occasional embrasure,

was suggestive enough, and Dermot ran about exploring happily, and frowning from various places of eminence over the placid expanse of waters, so disappointingly void of craft, suspicious or otherwise. When he had thoroughly explored the wall, there were a couple of blockhouses, once presumably the quarters of the garrison. The only disappointment was that there were no guns.

While he explored, running up every now and then with a question, the two men sat side by side on the cropped thymy grass, looking out to sea. Every now and then Primrose lay flat on his back and stared at the sky, waving a fat leg meditatively in the air. Each time he did this, his straw hat tilted off backwards, and he replaced it carefully as soon as he sat up again. His face, round and innocent, beamed with a radiance of its own, and once Dermot was almost startled to see how blue his eyes were when they reflected the light of the sky.

Presently Dermot realized that his uncle was calling him.

'Yes, Uncle Ben?'

'Oh, there you are, son. I was wondering where you'd got to. We must soon be getting back to our tea. If you'd like to see the blow hole, there's just time before we go. Would you?'

'Please!'

Dermot had heard a good deal of the blow hole. It was, apparently, on the same lines as the blow hole at the Forty-foot. That was a hole in the solid masonry, some yards from the sea, whither, in rough weather, unsuspecting persons might be lured to their disadvantage: for every now and then, when an extra big wave rolled in, the pressure of water beneath the hollow rock forced a spurt of spray up through the hole with sufficient violence and volume to drench any one within range. This blow hole, however, besides being entirely the work of nature, was much larger. Dermot, peering down at Uncle Ben's behest, saw a small cave with smooth, worn sides, that sloped and tapered downwards like an egg cup to a hole at the bottom of which the unseen water sucked and bubbled.

'Will it squirt us?'

'Ah, no, son. Not on a calm day. Only when it's rough.

And even then there's more noise than water. It makes a queer moaning sound, uncanny enough, if you didn't know what it was.'

Dermot backed a step or two away.

'You can get closer, if you like——' Uncle Ben was now speaking to Primrose. 'Look—like this.'

Catching hold of a corner of rock, he swung down to a small ledge, and thence to a larger one, and stood, leaning back, against the smooth, sloping side.

'Come down this way. To this ledge. No, not you, son. You stay where you are. Here, Primrose—it's dead easy. Catch hold on that rock.'

'I've a poor head for heights, mind ye,' said Primrose, gingerly making preparations to obey.

'Never mind your head. There—that's right. Now, put down your left foot. No, your *left* foot. Feel for the ledge. Farther. Farther, man. *There.*'

His face screwed up, his eyes tight shut, Primrose felt with his foot till he found the ledge. Then he emitted a sigh of relief, opened his eyes, and winked up at Dermot.

'Take care,' he announced suddenly. 'I'm going to jump.'

And, before Uncle Ben could protest, Primrose had let himself go, descending with such a clatter and slither that he overbalanced and would have gone down the hole itself if Uncle Ben had not seized him by the arm.

'Easy, easy, man! Look what you're doing. Sure you nearly had the two of us over.'

Primrose's answer was a wild laugh.

'I gave you warning,' he exclaimed. 'I gave you due and proper warning, in form. I'm coming, said I, and I came. Sure I couldn't say fairer than that.'

He laughed again.

'Now that I *am* here—what is there to see?'

'Careful, now, and I'll show you. Here—hold on to my arm.'

'Ah, let me go. I'm not a child. Let me go, McManus, dammit. Let go, I say.'

Dermot gaped, hardly able to believe his ears. Yet Primrose could not be angry, for he immediately broke into a fresh explosion of laughter.

'Easy, Primrose, EASY, man. You'll fall in.'

'Oh no I won't,' said Primrose, in a very different voice, a small, quiet, cunning voice. 'Oh no I won't. Now—see? I'm being careful: I have hold here, d'ye see? Now—what am I to look at?'

'Faith, you need look at nothing, if you don't want. It's only that you can see how deep it is down to the water, if you lean out a bit. But be careful, now.'

Grunting stertorously, Primrose leaned out, and gazed into the depths. He twisted his head right round to one side, till he had to make a sudden grab to save his hat.

'McManus, that's wonderful.' His tones were hushed with awe. 'That's a wonderful thing, I'm glad you brought me here to show me that. I wouldn't have missed that sight for worlds.'

'That's right, then,' replied Uncle Ben heartily. 'And now, we'd best be going. The wife will be vexed with me if I bring the two of ye back late for your tea.'

Turning, he grasped the rock, and with a couple of agile movements scrambled up by Dermot's side.

'There, son. Did you get a good sight of it?'

'Yes, thank you, Uncle Ben.'

'Come on, then.'

Together the two began to walk off, when a falsetto wail recalled them.

'McManus! McManus! Help!'

Uncle Ben went back, Dermot at his heels.

'What ails you, man?'

Looking down, they saw Primrose's round face upturned in an expression of ridiculous dismay.

'I can't get up. I'm stuck.'

'Ah, nonsense. Catch hold of that rock. Move your foot. Put it on that ledge.'

'I can't. I can't. Me nerve's gone on me.'

'Rubbish. It's dead easy. Sure the child here could do it.'

Tentatively, Primrose moved a foot. He reached it out a few inches, then withdrew it again.

'I can't. It's too far.'

'Well, you must stop there, so.'

Uncle Ben turned, with a wink at Dermot, and made to go away. A wild scream arose from the hole.

'McManus! Ah, McManus! Don't leave me! Don't leave me!'

And, to Dermot's utter horror, the voice cracked into loud weeping.

Uncle Ben clicked with his tongue.

'Bad cess to the fella,' he said to Dermot. 'I'll have to go down for him.' Then, to the bellowing Primrose: 'All right, all right. Hang on. I'm coming for you.'

He climbed down, but Dermot, after one glance at Primrose's blotched and tear-stained face, drew back, physically unable to look. Never having seen a grown-up break down, he was shocked to the soul. He felt first sick, then angry, then inclined to cry himself. He felt soiled.

Fixing his eyes resolutely on the sea and the line of brooding mountains, he stood, while a series of grunts and gasps, punctuated by exhortations from Uncle Ben, ended in an undignified scrabbling sound, and Primrose emerged, blinking, to the outside world.

'Now,' said Uncle Ben. 'Are you right?'

'I am, thank ye, McManus, I am indeed. I'll never be able to thank ye. Only for you, I'd never have got out. Ye saved me life, McManus. Ye saved me life.'

'Ah, don't talk rubbish, man.'

'Yes, ye did,' averred Primrose. 'Ye saved me life.' And, out of the corner of his eye, Dermot saw with renewed horror that he had grabbed Uncle Ben's hand and was trying to kiss it.

How Uncle Ben avoided this demonstration he did not know, for he hurried along in front of the others to the boat. He could hear Primrose babbling away behind him, first talking to Uncle Ben, then, in reaction after his deliverance, trying to whistle and to sing. When they were just coming to the mooring place, he suddenly cried out that his shoe had come undone.

'You mustn't mind him,' said Uncle Ben in a low voice, as he came up to Dermot. 'He's wanting, poor fella.'

Dermot stared, mystified.

'Wanting what?'

'Wanting sense. Not right in the head.'

'Here I am, boys,' cried Primrose, running after them.

'Oh boys, oh boys. Here I am, like a bad penny.'

He winked at Dermot, and continued, all the time Uncle Ben was getting the boat, winking and smiling and making faces. Embarrassed and furious, Dermot looked away at the mainland opposite. His feelings about Primrose were boiling and bubbling like a saucepan on the hob. He did not want anything to do with him, did not want ever to see him again.

Uncle Ben again rowed, and for most of the way across the Sound Primrose kept trying to attract Dermot's attention, nudging him to look while he performed some trick or made a face. He made his cork noises, he conjured with a half-penny, he squealed, he grunted: but Dermot sat fast, his eyes fixed upon the houses, upon the Hill of Howth, upon Uncle Ben, praying for the voyage to be over. Finally Primrose desisted, and sat back with a sigh.

'I don't think I'll come back to tea, McManus, thank ye,' he said, when they stood safely upon the roadway. 'I'm still feeling a bit upset in meself. I think I'd best go home.'

'As you like, Primrose. As you like. You know you're more than welcome.'


'I think I'll go home.'

'Very well. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, McManus. Thank ye for what ye did for me.' He looked at Dermot, his eyes pathetic as those of a dog that has been rebuffed. 'Good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' said Dermot unwinkingly.

Primrose raised his straw hat, stood for a moment looking after them, then turned and trotted disconsolately off. Dermot shook himself, shut his eyes, and took hold of Uncle Ben's hand: and uncle and nephew made their way up the hill together.



XVIII

LOBSTERS

THE spring tide was at its lowest ebb. It lay still in lassitude. Close to the shore, the satin-smooth surface was spread with unbroken light. Farther out, where currents broke it, it glittered drowsily in the sun. The gulls near the shore were silent. A few beyond the broken water uttered occasional desultory cries that emphasized the exhausted peace of the July afternoon.

So low was the tide that the boat could not take its passengers from the accustomed place, and Old Michael bade them with gestures to a rock some twenty yards further on. They made their way cautiously, slipping on the seaweed.

'I score, you see,' laughed Peter, a boy of sixteen, pushing his shorts high on his bare legs and helping the old man slide the boat over the sand.

'Eassy, eassy!'

With an agile hop old Michael got aboard, landing with his knee on the thwart. Caring nothing for a wet boot, he managed miraculously to avoid one. He scrabbled apeline to his place, and backed the boat in for the two guests. A minute later they were away.

Michael turned in his seat, and screwed his face into a terrifying mask of wrinkles against the dazzle.

'We go to the lochan,' he pronounced. 'But first we try the places I know in the east passage.'

'Hadn't we better go straight to the lochan?'

'First we try the places in the east passage.'

The boy grinned at his father's guests. Once old Michael had decided on a thing, the thing was law. He could, of course, be overborne by the sheer force of authority; yet his employers had learned that, if this were done, developments had a regrettable way of proving the old man to have been right.

The boat slid along, past rocks that might have been painted, and bunches of broad, unfamiliar weed. Looking

over the side, the guests beheld the sea's floor a dozen or more feet below: tall aspiring weeds, tiny fish, and clear patches of white sand that seemed to float up towards them and then reel in drunken consternation as the boat's ripple caught them. Hudson dipped in his hand, and uttered an exclamation. The water was surprisingly cold.

The entry to the passage was small, but the old man, with an apparently casual glance over his shoulder, calculated it perfectly. For a few yards the way continued narrow. Then, rounding a huge rock, they came to a wider stretch.

'Look. Another boat.'

Michael stared at Hudson, turned, and growled a blood-curdling oath.

'It is Ian Macdonald,' he said. 'He is before us. I cannot visit my places. He would see me, and learn them. We will go by him, and hurry to the lochan before he can come.'

It is probable that Ian Macdonald was no better pleased by the encounter. Between him and Michael a fierce rivalry existed. Ian was a whole generation younger, and his father, Michael's contemporary, had been obliged by rheumatism to give up fishing. Ian, who coveted Michael's post as ghilly to the Big House, was always on the look out for a chance to surpass him. He seldom got it.

Smiling, the younger man amiably greeted the party.

'How do you do, Mr. Stewart, sir.'

'Afternoon, Ian. Any luck?'

'Only a couple, so far. But I have not tried many places yet.' He smiled again. 'Did you get many?'

'We've only just started.'

Old Michael, his face grimly set, pulled past him, and the boat headed for the open water. Ian watched it go. They saw the smile on his face.

'That's all right. We're bound to get there before him now.'

'Did he want to go where we're going?'

'You bet he did. What are you grumbling about, Michael?'

The old man muttered something, not easy to catch, about other places he had wished to try.

'Here.' The boy moved in the bows. 'Give me one oar. We'll get there quicker, and have time to cut back before him.'

'No. He will work the shore before us.'

'But we know of several places he doesn't.'

'Ugh—Agh.'

'Give me one of the oars, anyhow. The sooner we're there, the better.'

'Very good.'

Old Michael spoke with resignation, using and increasing the delay to light his pipe. Ten minutes' steady pulling brought them to the nearest of the three rocky islands. They were in quest of lobsters—not by the prosaic method of the lobster pot, but by the more hazardous and exciting method of the bent wire and the bare hand. The lochan, or lagoon, upon Glas Eilean was a famous place, but at any except spring tides the odds were too heavy on the lobster. Old Michael was ready to try on any day of the month. 'Many's the time I am putting off my trousers, aye, and my shirt too,' he told the visitors proudly; but the place had been overhunted, and by tacit agreement it was now left for an exceptionally low tide.

'Ian is greedy, and a fool,' said Michael, as they made their way in to the mirror-like peace of the lagoon. 'He should have come here straight, instead of fooling about in the passage.'

The boy winked at the others.

'He wanted to get there before you, Michael.'

'Small good it will do him. He knows nothing.'

He brought the boat up close to a rock, and the party disembarked.

'Go easy. Sometimes they're out in the open. It doesn't do to scare them.'

Michael and the boy crept on ahead, armed each with a long piece of stiff wire curved into a hook. Warily they approached a large circular rock. The last couple of yards they made on hands and knees. The boy peered underneath the rock, then beckoned to his guests. Hudson and Williams joined him, breathing heavily, and looked where he pointed. At first they saw nothing but a pool of shallow water, six

inches deep perhaps, with a few stones and weeds and a rather obscene-looking anemone.

'There, look. At the back.'

'I thought that was a weed.'

'Well, it isn't. It's a whisker. A big one too. Shall I dip for him, Michael? You go round to the back.'

The old man nodded, and shuffled round to the far side.

'It's hollow underneath, you see,' the boy whispered. 'Often if you tickle them on one side, they go right through to the other, and you can catch 'em coming out backwards. H'st!'

The weed-like object had stirred. Catching his breath, the boy slid the wire hook as far as he could to the right of it, then jerked at it hard. The water broke, there was a furious scrabbling struggle, and a scraping of wire on rock.

'Damn. Missed him!'

He groped again, scouring savagely about.

'Did you not get him, Mr. Peter?' came Michael's voice.

'No. He's got away under the low bit.'

'Och.'

The boy lay flat on his chest on the weedy rock, and began systematically raking about. Suddenly there came a grunt from the far side, and a strange clicking sound. Peter scrambled up, and ran round.

'What's that?' Hudson scrambled after him. 'Have you got him?'

'No. Another one—a little chap.'

Dark blue, very clean, active and indignant, a small lobster dangled from the old man's paw, its claws drooping, its tail jerking convulsively. The boy produced a piece of string, and in a few seconds the drooping claws were tied together.

'There.' He handed it to Hudson. 'You shall hold him.'

Hudson accepted the charge dubiously, and they returned to the opposite side of the rock, where the pursuit of the other lobster was resumed. The succeeding twenty minutes proved to both visitors that the hunt for lobsters, enthralling to the hunter, soon becomes dull for the spectator. The lurker beneath the big rock put up a stern resistance. He kept gripping the wire in his claws, and Hudson and Williams were

both invited to pull on it and feel the strength of his grip. In the end he was caught, whisked out with a deft jerk of Michael's experienced hand, rolled over clicking on the weed, and pinioned before he could find a new refuge. Then the boy proceeded to test different smaller stones in the lagoon. He stationed his guests where they could see the sides, and began to feel cautiously under each rock with the wire. Hudson and Williams watched slowly muddying patches of water with a concentration which made their eyes ache. The first two stones were blank. At the third the hunter observed excitedly that he felt something. Hudson, peering, uttered a yelp—but the moving object turned out to be a small crab. Williams, warned by this, ventured dubiously after about ten minutes that he saw a whisker.

'Where?'

'Here—look. Just beside that——'

There was a sudden pounce, an oath, a splash, and the boy fell on his face in the shallow water. He struggled, puffed, and came up again—clutching a lobster.

'Hurt yourself?'

'Not a bit, thanks. Grazed my knee, that's all.'

'Rash, isn't it, to grab for him like that? Mightn't he bite you?'

'He might. Only I didn't give him time.'

'That's enough for here,' interjected old Michael at this point. 'Now we go back.'

'What will you do in those wet clothes?'

'This.'

The boy peeled off his two garments, shaking himself like a seal.

'You'll be cold.'

'Not I. I'll row.'

'Here. Take this to sit on, anyway.'

'Thanks. Where shall we go next, Michael?'

'Bay of the Head.'

'Bay of the Head?' repeated Hudson, scanning the coast.

'I don't see any. Or do you call that little point a head?'

'Not that sort of head. A cut-off head.'

'What?'

'Ask Michael. He'll tell you.'

The old man did not seem to hear. He took his pipe out of his mouth, squinted severely into the bowl, and put it back again. There was an expectant silence. The visitors glanced at one another, smiling uncomfortably.

'It was,' said Michael suddenly, 'a long time ago. Maybe a hundred years. Maybe more than a hundred years. The laird was a Macdonald. It was the reaping time, and a woman of the MacLeods of Skye came to work for him at the reaping. For two days all was well. Then she had a quarrel with a woman of the Macdonalds, and she went to the laird and told him how the woman of the Macdonalds was each day stealing corn for herself and hiding it away. When this was shown to him, the laird sent away the woman of the Macdonalds, and would not let her work any more.

'Now, there was always a bad blood between the Macdonalds and the MacLeods of Skye, and every one took it ill that a woman of the MacLeods should come seeking work and then make trouble. So the husband of the woman of the Macdonalds and her brother and other relations went by night to where the woman of the MacLeods was sleeping. They put a bandage over her mouth so that she should not cry. Then they brought her down to the edge of the field there below the clump of trees, and took off her head with a reaping hook. But while they were doing it she gave one cry, and for fear of her ghost they would not let the head lie with the body. So they buried the body at the corner of the field, where there is deep sand, and the head they weighted with a stone tied into its own long hair, and threw into the little bay below the white rock.'

The visitors stared, hardly able to believe their ears. There was a lunatic incongruity between the peace of the scene—the still water, the dazzling white of the beaches, the heavy woods, the mountains sleepily outlined on the haze—and this tale of bygone savagery, told in matter of fact tones between the puffs of a rank clay pipe. Surely, the old man was pulling their leg. Yet was there ever a country that so belied its furious history? Could that dreaming island have been the scene of a brutal massacre? Could men have killed each other on that short smiling strand? The history said so.

They looked at the boy; but he, his naked body glowing

brown in the sun, rowed softly, an abstracted expression on his face.

‘They threw in the head, because they knew that what is buried in water cannot walk on land. But the woman of the MacLeods had a strong ghost. She had no head, but the rest of her walked the field and the rocks, and began to persecute all the men and women and children of the Macdonalds. True it was, she was not able to walk far. But to all who came near her, for a long time, a very long time, she brought harm and death. Always without a head, she was appearing to them, and, because of the one cry she gave as she was dying, she was able to speak, even though she had no head, which was more terrible still. Sir Alexander Macdonald she killed, frightening his horse so that it reared and threw him on the railing of the field. My grandfather saw his body carried into the house. A child of the Macdonalds, a young boy, she frightened when he was getting honeysuckles in the evening, so that he fell on the rocks and died in a day. An old woman, Augusina Macdonald of Keppoch, she appeared to, frightening her so that she fell and broke her hip, and died a week after. A father and son of the Macdonalds were drowned in the little bay in the big storm of eighteen hundred and forty-one. Aye, and the young Mistress Macdonald she frightened, when she was carrying her first child, and it was too soon born, though it lived, and its mother too.

‘Yes. The ghost without a head had things all her own way against the Macdonalds, till one day she appeared to the wrong man. She appeared to Hughie Macdonald, one night, when he was coming back from the inn at Arisaig. Now, Hughie had a good dram taken, and the ghost should have known that when Hughie had a dram taken he was not afraid of anything. The ghost might have known how it was with him, too, for Hughie was taking the short cut there by Glas na Corp, where no sober man will walk after darkness has fallen. But the ghost was foolish, and she rose up and appeared to Hughie Macdonald. But instead of being afraid, Hughie made a big lunge, and seized hold of the ghost. She had no head, but Hughie was a terrible man; he did not mind that at all. He seized hold of the

ghost, and began to drag her along. The ghost screamed, and a far scream came up out of the water, like an echo, from where the head lay; but Hughie did not care for that either.

"Where are you taking me?" said the ghost presently, when Hughie had dragged her up as far as Cross Beck.

"Wait and you'll see," said Hughie.

"Let me go, strong man of the Macdonalds," said the ghost.

"I will not let you go, headless woman of the MacLeods of Skye," said Hugh: and he dragged her on and on, till he came to the top of the hill above Glenan Cross. The farm was not yet built, but there was a cottage there.

"That gives us a date," put in the boy. "Cross Farm was built in eighteen sixty."

"There was a cottage there," repeated Old Michael. "It was before Cross Farm was built."

He paused, frowning, and seemed to think he was being contradicted. As no one spoke, he went on.

"In the window of the cottage there was a light burning. When the ghost saw the light, she was in great terror and distress, for she thought it was the light of dawn, and no ghost can face the light of dawn, or any light stronger than the dusk of a winter afternoon. So she cried out very loud: 'Let me go, strong man of the Macdonalds, let me go.'"

"No," said Hughie. "You have been a vexation to all of my blood. I will not let you go."

"Let me go, let me go, I cannot bear the light, let me go."

"No."

"Let me go," again said the ghost, "and I will promise and swear on oath to you, never to vex any of you again, as long as there shall be a man of your blood left living."

"Hughie stopped and thought at those words. "Will you promise that, woman without a head?" he asked.

"I will promise and swear it."

"And will you go back to Skye, where you came from?"

"I will go back to Skye, and bide there, as long as there is a man of you left alive."

"Very well," said Hughie. And he let her go.

There was a silence.

Hudson chuckled uncertainly.

'Well,' he said. 'What happened then? Did she keep her word?'

'Och yes, she kept her word. She has never been seen since. And it is not likely she will be seen for a long time yet, for there are seven men of the Macdonalds alive here to-day.'

He broke off, turned, screwed up his eyes, and spat into the water. Then he smiled his rare, grim smile.

'I could wish she would break her word, and come back and torment Ian Macdonald,' he said. 'Look. He is before us.'

He pointed with the stem of his pipe to a rock two hundred yards ahead, round which projected, just visible, the stern of a boat.

'He is before us,' Old Michael repeated. 'We may as well go home.'

XIX

THE ABSENTEE

THE smallish man in the corner looked up, coughed self-consciously, and made his first contribution to the discussion.

'He isn't no loss,' he said, 'Frank isn't.'

There was a short, unfavourable silence. Old George Shapcott fixed him with a reproving eye.

'We don't require you to tell us that, Arthur Treadgold,' he said severely. 'There's several has been here longer than you, and known the man years afore you come here.'

'Ah,' approved another ancient. 'Years afore.'

Treadgold, abashed by the disapproval, coloured and looked down again into his glass.

'All the same,' said another voice, from the corner. "'Tis only the truth. Frank isn't no loss. I for one shan't grumble if we never sees him back again.'

The landlord, who during this interruption had been

leaning on his elbows, made a sideways gesture with his hand.

'That isn't the point,' he said. 'We all have our own opinions of the man. But there's more to it than that.' He paused, and pursed up his lips beneath his coarse black moustache. 'There's more to it than that. If Frank was minded to go——'

He broke off, as the door opened, and a man stepped across the threshold. The man blinked for a second at the light, banged the door after him, and with an air of defiant unconcern walked across and seated himself at the bar, immediately in front of the landlord.

'Pint, please,' he said. Then, aware of the dead silence, he darted a couple of almost invisible glances right and left, blinked rapidly, and began to whistle through his teeth.

The landlord, recovering himself, moved slowly to draw the beer. His features, more mobile than those of the others, expressed his own emotions and theirs. While they wore the expressionless faces of countrymen confronted by something they have not had time to think about, his worked with obstinate suspicion. His thick under-lip, which had drooped at sight of the newcomer, was pursed up again. His eyes, with the baggy pouches under them, had become wary. His head seemed to set more solidly than ever on his thick neck, his heavy jaw to brace itself, the purplish red of his face to deepen. Then, as he finished drawing the pint and slid it over, his tension seemed to relax. It was as though one could see the man's whole frame ease and cool down. His expression became bland and infinitely cunning. He took the money, changed it, pushed the change across, and leaned forward persuasively towards his customer.

'Why, Fred,' he exclaimed, in treacly tones. 'You're quite the stranger. Isn't he, chaps?'

He looked round at the others, and they stampeded into speech.

'Ah, that he is.'

'Quite the stranger.'

'Hasn't been here this long time.'

'We reckoned you wasn't ever coming to see us again, Fred.'

The newcomer gave a narrow, pale smirk, and did not answer. He took a second pull at his glass. Almost lovingly, the landlord watched him.

'Ah,' Fred said at last, wiping his small moustache on the back of his hand. 'That's better.'

'Have another,' said the landlord, and reached out his hand for the glass. It checked half-way, as he received a glance, swift, calculating, cold as a snake's: not so much a glance as a glitter, instantly veiled.

'Thanks. I don't mind if I do.'

'That's right,' said the landlord hastily. His inside had turned cold. The glance had been so swift it might almost have been a trick of the light. As he drew the beer, this time without looking up, his forces returned thickly to the battle. His manner, as he pushed over the second glass, was blander than ever.

'How is it you haven't been down to see us, then?' he asked innocently.

The lightning glance flickered again.

'Too busy, perhaps?' hazarded some one.

The newcomer frowned down his long nose.

'Maybe I was,' he replied. 'And maybe I wasn't.'

A silence followed. Slowly, carefully, the landlord looked around the room. Easy, all, said his glance. Easy. Leave him to me.

'I dare say you had a good deal to do,' he suggested, 'left single-handed all of a sudden.'

The pale eyelids flickered, and the face over the glass went sharp and still. Certainly, Fred Ellacott was no beauty. His forehead was low, his face long, pale, and narrow, his nose sharp, and his eyes close together. It was never a face to inspire confidence. Now, alert and quivering, it suggested nothing so much as a weasel scenting danger.

But Joe, watching, felt a sudden conviction of mastery. There was cunning there, but it was an animal cunning. The man had no brain. There was nothing to be afraid of.

'Very inconsiderate of Frank, I must say,' he went on, 'to run off so sudden, and leave you with everything to see to yourself.'

Without replying, Fred took a long pull at his glass.

'But then, he never was very considerate of other people, Frank, was he?'

Finishing, Fred set it down, and uttered a grunt that might have been affirmative.

'Can't say as I ever found him so, anyway,' pursued the landlord. 'In fact, I've often wondered how you managed to put up with him. Downright bad, I reckon he served you, more than once.'

He looked around the room. The others took their cue.

'Ah, that he did.'

'An unreasonable man to deal with. Very set in his opinions.'

'Very hard in his dealings.'

'That's right.'

The rush of sympathy excited Fred. His face twitched.

'Still,' said the landlord, reaching unobtrusively for his glass, 'you don't need us to tell you what he was like. *You* know, better than anybody: living with him all those years.'

He filled the glass as he spoke, and pushed it back.

'Ah,' said Fred. 'I know.'

He gave a morose, secret smile, and picked up the glass. With narrowed eyes, the landlord leaned forward over the bar.

'*Where* is it he's gone?' he asked.

The face shut down again. Only the sudden contraction showed how it had relaxed.

'France.'

There was a movement in the room.

'Why,' quavered old Shapcott, 'you told us, before, he'd gone to Belgium.'

Fred twisted in his seat. 'Belgium or France,' he snapped. 'I can't remember which. 'Twas one or t'other.'

'How did you know?' persisted the old man.

'He left a letter.'

'Where is it?'

'I chucked it in the fire. What did it matter to me where he'd gone?'

He was suspicious again now, suspicious and angry. Joe looked reproof at the questioner.

'Of course it doesn't matter,' he said soothingly. 'And,

come to that, he might easy have gone to France or to Belgium. He was in both, in the war. They was the only foreign parts he ever was in. So what more natural, if he was minded to go abroad, he should go to one or the other?’

‘Ah, that’s right.’

They came in once more laboriously upon their cue.

‘One or the other, ’twould sure have been.’

‘Well, France or Belgium,’ resumed Joe.

‘Belgium,’ snapped Fred.

‘Belgium, then—it don’t matter to you, nor to no one else. He’s gone; and you’ve got the place to yourself. I mean,’ he amended quickly, ‘you’ve got all the work to do yourself.’

‘That’s right,’ said Fred, after a pause.

‘Well,’ said Joe, as if thinking aloud. ‘I don’t know but what I wouldn’t prefer that. Hard work it may be, and every one knows you worked hard enough before, when there was the two of you—’

‘Ah, that he did,’ came in the chorus, a beat late as usual. ‘Uncommon hard.’

‘—All the same, I’d sooner work harder and be my own master, and be free from any one nagging at me all the time, than to work with some one like Frank around. What do you say, friends?’

‘That’s right.’

‘’Tis dispiriting, to work for a taskmaster, that’s what ’tis.’

‘Nobody wasn’t my master,’ exclaimed Fred, turning to the speaker. ‘Nobody wasn’t my master, understand that. I was my own master, always. I never gave a damn for the —’.

‘O’ course you didn’t,’ soothed Joe. ‘O’ course you didn’t. But, what George means, you didn’t get the credit o’ what you done, nor yet the benefit. And there’s no denying Frank was a bullying sort.’

‘He couldn’t bully me.’

‘No. But I’ll lay he tried?’

A look of delighted cunning stole over the narrow face.

‘Ah. He tried.’

‘You were his match, I’ll lay,’ said Joe. ‘You weren’t

the sort to knuckle under to him.' His voice had softened, but in the intense silence it sounded louder than before. 'Elder brother or no elder brother, you weren't the sort to let him trample you down.'

Stealthily, he stretched out a hand for the emptied glass.

'I know how you stood up to him, for I've heard the man talk of it.' As silently as possible, he drew off the liquor. 'More than once, in this very bar, I've heard him complain how he couldn't get his way with you. "I'll show him who's master," I've heard him say. "I'll learn him." "Ah," I thought to myself. "Will you, though. I'm not so sure about that."'

Sweat stood on Fred's forehead. His hand, as it reached for the pint unobtrusively slipped close to it, did not instantly connect with its object.

"You've met your match there," I thought,' Joe went on. "'You may bully the rest you come in contact with, but you've met your match there.'"

He was swallowing it, the poor fool! Joe looked around, his eyes gleaming, on the circle of awed, tense faces. Exultantly he felt his power. He had the whole room in his grip, and the besotted fool before him tightest of all.

In his joy he was led to a further pitch of daring.

'In fact,' he said, little above a whisper, 'I shouldn't wonder if that wasn't the reason he's gone.'

Fred sat still. Then his mouth twitched, and he hid a smirk in his glass.

Joe raised his head, his mouth half open, an indescribable expression on his face. So a man might pause, who was stalking an animal, well satisfied for the moment at having crossed a dangerous space without rousing its suspicions. At his gesture the tension slackened. The men coughed, and shuffled their feet.

'How long has he been gone?' Joe asked old Shapcott, across Fred's head.

Startled, the old man pulled himself together.

'I can't rightly say. How long is it, Sam? A month?'

'More than that,' said a voice quickly. "'Twas before the drain at the foot of my meadow got choked, and that were five weeks last Friday.'

'About six-seven weeks, then.'

'Seven, all but a day or so.'

'A long time for the man to absent himself.' Joe was eyeing Fred again. 'Looks almost as if he didn't mean to come back, doesn't it, chaps?'

'Ah. That it does.'

'I wouldn't say that,' said a dark, thickset man near the door. 'If Frank went off to foreign parts, likely he'd stay a while. 'Twouldn't be worth going for a short trip.'

'If he'd gone for a holiday, that might be so,' Joe conceded. 'But, on my thinking of it, he didn't go for a holiday.' He kept his eyes on Fred. 'No. I think he'd had enough, and left the place to the better man.'

Fred gave no sign that he had heard. He looked straight in front of him.

'That's my belief about the matter. He tried his bullying tatticks once too often.'

The room was suddenly tense again. There was not a sound. So fixedly were they all regarding Fred that, when he reached for and tilted his glass, the movement made them jump.

'That's it, chaps.' Joe's voice had dropped again. 'He tried his games on once too often. There was a row——'

'Who said there was a row?'

Facing round furiously, Fred glared at the landlord. 'Who said there was a row?' he repeated.

Joe leaned forward, till he was almost overhanging the smaller man. He smiled broadly, and began to laugh, a thick, soft laugh.

'Ho, ho! Fred. You artful devil. You're a nice one, you are. Going on so quiet all the time, letting us all think you were a meek, milk-and-water sort. Ho, ho! But you aren't quite clever enough. I spotted the vi'lence in you. I knew you weren't the sort to take Frank's bullying ways lying down. Ho, ho! Who'd buy *you* for a fool, eh?'

He reached forward, and nudged Fred in the ribs. For an instant, the man stiffened. Then, in spite of himself, a simper of pride appeared on his face. He sat back, wagging his head.

Joe took the opportunity to gets his glass.

'Oho,' he went on, sweeping it out of sight below the counter. 'You're a deep one. A regular masterpiece. Holiday abroad, indeed! Why, the fellow had to run for his life. Seven weeks! He won't be back for seven years.'

'Oh, surely,' objected the thickset man. 'Seven years! Why——'

'What'll you bet?' All the time he was speaking, Joe was busy with the glass. 'What'll you bet?'

'I aren't a betting man. All the same——'

'Oh, come on. They all say that, when you pin 'em down. Will you back your opinion, or won't you?' He winked furiously round upon them. For a moment they did not understand. Then, in answer to frantic nods, one spoke up.

'I'll bet with you, landlord. I'll bet with you.'

'Good. There's one man among you, at any rate. Now—what shall it be? Five quid he comes back before seven years?'

'Five quid's a lot o' money,' demurred the voice.

'That's my bet, anyway.' Joe produced Fred's glass, and handed it over. 'Five quid he don't come back for seven years.'

'You'll lose your money,' said old Shapcott, moistening his lips with his tongue.

'Oh no I shan't.'

Fred tasted his glass, started, and blinked into it. Joe eyed him, holding his breath. He seemed about to protest, then sighed, and drank again.

'I shan't lose my money.'

'How do you know?'

'Why——' Joe began to laugh again. 'Look at this masterpiece of a chap here. How he must be laughing at us all, up his sleeve. Knowing all about it, and not letting on. Did you ever see such a cunning clever figurehead for keeping his own counsel?'

Fred was smirking again. He sat upright, his head swaying slightly, his eyes all but closed.

'Frank won't come back,' whispered the landlord, leaning on the bar. 'He won't never come back. And what I say is, a damned good riddance. It's my way of thinking, we

ought to pass a vote of thanks to the chap who got rid of him.'

'Ah.'

'That's the idea.'

Fascinated, sick with tension, hardly able to breathe, they sat, gripping their chairs, watching the pale smirking face, the swaying head.

Joe was bent almost double across the counter. The veins stood out at the side of his forehead.

'Tell us, Fred,' he whispered, very softly, very slowly. 'We're all friends here. Tell us. You did him in. Didn't you?'

They could not breathe. The silence hammered in their ears.

Fred swayed, still smiling. For a few moments he made no sign. Then he gave a sudden hideous little snigger.

'Yes,' he said, quite loudly. 'I did him in, all right.'

A deep sigh went out, the release of a dozen breaths. Then silence again. Joe's whisper was gentle and soft: he might have been caressing a child.

'How, Fred? How did you fix the bastard?'

Fred's eyes were still shut. Then he opened them, and Joe shrank back an inch from their mad cold glee.

'D'you really want to know?' he asked. 'All of you?'

'Yes, Fred.' Joe, smiling, blinked his eyes. 'We want to know, all right. Any one who did away with Frank did us all a good turn.'

Once again, Fred sniggered. The chill of something non-human went round the room. They watched him, fascinated.

'It was with a spade,' he said.

'A spade?'

'Yes. I had it in by the fire, scraping of it. He came in.'

'Did he say anything to you? Barge at you, or anything?'

'No. He sat beside me, so's I could see his boots and his leggings out of the corner of my eye. Then it came over me all of a sudden, and "You bastard," I said, and I jumped up and hit him over the head with the spade.'

The violent gesture which accompanied the words almost over-balanced him. He recovered, and sat, swallowing.

'Yes,' softly prompted Joe. 'Go on, Fred. Tell us what happened then.'

'He tried to get up, and stuck half sitting, holding on to the arm of his chair. So I hit him again, to make him let go.'

'Did he let go?'

'No. He was all stiff. I gave him another then, and he let go all of a sudden, and went down on his knees, like he was praying.' Again the snigger convulsed the lean face. 'He opened his mouth, wide open, and began bellowing. I gave him three more, and he lay down quiet.'

'So,' said Joe, leaning back. 'The clothes were sticking to his body. 'So that's how you fixed him, eh?'

'That's how I fixed him.'

The words came slowly. Fred was rocking on his chair. Evidently he was getting sleepy.

'And where did you put him?'

'What about the blood?' put in a hoarse voice, before Fred could answer.

The cunning leer reappeared.

'I washed it up, and burned the spade clean in the fire. There wasn't a drop to see, by the time I done.'

'Where did you put him, Fred?'

'In—the—cabbage—patch.'

The men, their muscles aching, sat back limp in their chairs. Fred, his eyes closed, swayed more dangerously. He hiccupped.

'In the cabbage patch, eh?' breathed Joe. 'So that's where he is.'

'That's—where—he—is.'

Fred spoke sleepily, a pause between each word.

'Can you show him to us?'

The answer was a long time coming.

'What d'you want to see him for? He won't be no picture.' Fred sniggered again. 'He's been laying there seven weeks.'

'I got a fancy to see him, all the same. Haven't you, George?'

The old man cleared his throat. Joe nodded fiercely.

'I—I—ah—— Yes, that's right. I——'

'I'd like it, too.'

Other voices, under compulsion of that masterful nodding, chimed unconvincingly in. A sulky, suspicious look had hardened on Fred's face.

'Well, you shan't,' he said.

'Why not, Fred?' Joe's tone was honey.

'Cos—cos I don't choose, that's all.' He opened his eyes. 'My garden, isn't it? My house?'

'And your brother,' put in the thickset man, with a hysterical titter.

The others frowned. They felt the remark to be in bad taste.

'Oho,' said Joe. 'I understand. That's the size of it, is it? I understand.'

His voice was so full of meaning that it penetrated even to Fred's drowning intelligence.

'What d'you understand?' he asked thickly.

'Why you won't let us see him. Shall I tell you for why?' Once more Joe leaned across the bar. 'Because he isn't there. Because the whole thing is a yarn you've been telling us, to make out what a fine bloody chap you are. You never hit him at all.'

Fred spat like a cat. 'Never hit him, didn't I? Very well, then. Come along, every bloody man of you. I'll show you if I hit him or no.'

He rose, staggered, and almost fell. At a sign from Joe, two villagers shuffled forward and took him each by an arm.

'I'll show you.' He glared with great venom at Joe. 'I'll show you.'

'Right you are, Fred,' replied the landlord cheerfully. 'You show me.'

As Fred, still spitting and cursing, was led out of the door, there was a hoarse consultation in the rear.

'You run, Arthur, will you?'

'Very good, Joe.'

And, pale and shaken, Arthur Treadgold hurried off down the road to fetch the village constable, while Joe and the rest proceeded slowly up the road.

It was bright moonlight. The trees stood up, laden with their September foliage, weighed down beneath the burden

of moonlight into a silent resignation. Fred's voice, boastful and loud, sounded ahead, as he and his escort zig-zagged along. Now and again one of them would answer him monosyllabically. Save for an occasional whisper, or nervous laugh, the rest of the party followed silently.

Presently, as they neared Fred's cottage, feet sounded behind, and Joe, stopping to wait, was overtaken by Arthur and Hargreaves the constable. Arthur was almost winded by the double journey. His eyes were wide and distressed in the moonlight. The constable, blowing, but in better trim, had been caught reading in his shirt-sleeves, and had slipped an old tweed coat over his uniform trousers.

'Keep well back,' whispered Joe, though the quarry was well ahead. 'Don't let him see you.'

'That's all right,' replied the constable; and he began to question Joe, as they discreetly followed.

As they reached the cottage, and proceeded through the gate into the little garden, they heard Fred's voice upraised. Slightly sobered by the walk, he had turned truculent.

'I'll be damned if I dig him up,' he was exclaiming. 'Dig him up yourself, if you want him. I'm satisfied with him where he is.'

'Very good, Fred,' said the thickset man's voice. 'Where's the spade?'

'Find it your bloody self,' returned Fred morosely.

A couple of men went off, and soon returned. Joe and the constable stood well out of sight, hidden by the black shadow of a tree. The digging began. For a while there was no sound but the turning up of soft earth.

'Is he there, Sam?'

'Can you find anything?'

'No. Is he deep down, Fred?'

'Find—him—your—bloody—self,' intoned the voice, sleepy again.

The digging went on. The thickset man, his shirt sleeves white in the moon, had recovered from his first repugnance. To begin with, he had hardly dared drive his spade into the earth, for fear of what it might touch. Now, relieved, feeling the whole thing might be a hoax, he let drive with a will. His companion, whom a similar dread had hampered,

took fire from his example. Soon half the bed was turned up.

'I don't believe there's nothing here at all.'

'Having us on, like.'

'If he is, by God, we'll heave him in the pond.'

'All that beer I put down him,' whispered Joe to the constable. 'And whisky, too.'

'Whisky?'

'In his beer. I laced his last glass well. That's what——
Hullo!'

The thickset man's spade hit something that was at once soft and grated. He drove it down again, peered, then dropped his spade, turned away, and vomited.

Without a word the men grouped round. In a dead silence, broken only by the gasps behind them, they removed the earth until they could see enough. Hargreaves, accompanied by Joe, stepped forward, and looked down. He drew back, turned towards Fred, and groped in his pocket.

A couple of men seized Fred and hustled him forward.

A sudden sense of the changed atmosphere around him penetrated to Fred's brain. He began to struggle. The whites of his narrow eyes gleamed, slits of terror.

'Here!' he cried, as they held out his arms towards the constable. 'Here! You let me go. I want to go in and lay down. You let me go.'

'Ah,' said Hargreaves sadly, fixing the handcuffs on his wrists, a fatherly compassion in his tone. 'Tis too late for that now, Fred, I'm afraid. 'Tis too late for that now.'

XX

THE IMPOSITION

'SIX.'

'Sir!'

'Very well, then. Five.'

'Sir!'

'You know perfectly well by now, Russell, that if you are

dissatisfied with my marking I'm always ready to revise it—in the downward direction.'

'Oh, sir!'

'Are you satisfied, or do you wish me to revise still further?'

The victim sighed, rolling his eyes with every symptom of polite ill-usage.

Roger Champernown looked down at his book. He took a grip on himself, digging his nails into the palms of his hands. The moment had arrived. He glanced at the next few lines of the text. No, they were not unfairly hard. No one could say that he was deliberately choosing them because they were hard. Even supposing they contained opportunities for just the sort of mistake that the boy would be likely to make . . .

Was it fair for a man, whispered some inner voice, to use his psychological knowledge, his knowledge of a boy's character, in a guess to the boy's undoing? Nonsense, he retorted. Nonsense. It was the boy's business to know the whole piece, every word of it!

'Henderson. Translate.'

A fair-haired, handsome boy looked up with an air of surprise.

'Me, sir?'

'Your name is Henderson, I believe.'

'Quite right, sir.'

'What did you say?'

'Yes, sir.'

Champernown ventured to look up, and glared into the blue eyes that with deceptive frankness met his own.

'Translate, then—if you will be so good.'

The boy smiled. He stretched out his arms, as if shooting imaginary cuffs; smiled once more obligingly; and gave the passage his attention. He looked at it for a couple of seconds, then raised his eyebrows. The man must be humoured, said his gesture. It contrived also subtly to suggest that what was being asked of him was unreasonable.

'Let me see, now,' he murmured, as if to himself.

'Get on,' exclaimed Champernown thickly, and stopped, saying savagely to himself, Fool, fool; don't let yourself be drawn.

'I beg your pardon, sir.'

'Get on,' said Champernown.

The boy looked again at the text, inclining his head first to one side and then to the other.

'*Inde*,' he began. 'Thence—or thenceforward.'

He paused, and looked expectantly at Champernown, like a dog who has done a trick, and expects applause. Champernown kept his eyes fixed on his book.

'*Inde*,' repeated Henderson. 'Thenceforward, or thence. No, thenceforward, I think. Thenceforward. *Atrocious certamen*.' He hesitated. 'The atrocious strife . . .'

Champernown uttered a noise between a growl and a hiss.

'Isn't that right, sir?' asked the boy, leaning forward, as one deeply disappointed by the failure of his effort to please.

'Tacitus, as you may possibly have noticed,' observed the master with sarcasm, 'has an occasional habit of leaving out the verb.'

'Yes, sir. So thoughtless of him.'

'What?'

'Yes, sir. I had noticed.'

'It is a pity, then, Henderson, that you do not learn by experience.'

'Mr. Bernard Shaw says that we never learn by experience, sir.'

Champernown saw red. The boy was deliberately provoking him. Never mind. He would not be led into making a fool of himself again before the class. Henderson did not know his piece. He had probably concentrated upon the difficult bit near the end, the bit with the hard words in it, supposing that Champernown would give it to him out of spite. Champernown had guessed he would, and outwitted him by giving him this earlier, apparently easier bit. Evidently, the guess had been sound. All that was necessary was to sit tight and let the wretched boy establish his ignorance. *

Champernown sat tight, refusing every red rag, every bait, until he was able legitimately to pass sentence.

'Since you have omitted the formality of preparing your lesson, Henderson, you will remain and repair the omission this afternoon.'

'Repair what, sir?'

'Do the lesson which you have not done.'

'I'm awfully sorry, sir, but I'm afraid that's impossible.'

Shaking his head from side to side, the boy regarded him with sad blue eyes.

'Impossible?'

'Quite, I'm afraid, sir. You see, I have to attend fielding practice with Mr. Bevan.'

Champernown swallowed.

'Very well, then. You will do it to-morrow afternoon.'

'Impossible, too, sir, I'm afraid. The Silchester match.'

It was a point of principle, and Champernown was not going to let it go. He had had Henderson on his nerves for weeks. He had been ready to like the boy, to be friendly with him. *He* hadn't begun all this. Yet, for no reason at all, the boy baited him, without mercy, seldom giving him a loophole for open action. Even so, he told himself, this was not the reason for pursuing him. It was a point of principle.

As he expected, the day after the match found Henderson equally elusive. Apparently he had another rendezvous with the headmaster. Doggedly, Champernown made his way after lunch to Bevan's study. He felt at a disadvantage before he had begun, but persisted, face and ears reddening.

'Oh, come.' The bluff, prematurely bald man eyed him tolerantly. 'Oh, come. Rather ancient history, isn't it?'

Champernown swallowed. He had known before he started that he was on a difficult errand. Henderson was the apple of the cricketing headmaster's eye, and, to make matters worse, he had made seventy-four in the match.

'Very well,' Champernown was saying in a few minutes. 'As you wish, of course. It will make matters difficult for me with my form if I have to show preferential treatment, but . . .'

The headmaster raised his eyebrows, but refused to be ruffled.

'Hardly preferential treatment, Champernown,' he said benignly. 'Boys are understanding creatures, you know. They'll understand all right.'

'You are making this very difficult for me, sir.'

'Oh come, Champernown, you exaggerate.' The headmaster spoke heartily. 'You take these little matters too seriously. A good fault, my dear fellow, but, nevertheless, a fault.'

Champernown stood, pale, dogged.

'It has happened before, sir.'

'What has?'

'Only a couple of weeks ago, when I had occasion to keep Henderson in, you—you excused him the imposition. The boy is clearly presuming on it. He defies me openly. I'm afraid he—and the others—may get the impression that you support him.'

The headmaster's face crimsoned. He turned impatiently on his heel.

'Oh, very well,' he snapped over his shoulder. 'Have it your own way, Champernown. Have it your own way.'

, At twenty past three, two afternoons later, Champernown decided he must have a breath of air. Even with the windows wide open, the empty classroom was stifling. Henderson's exercise book lay open before him. He had taken twenty minutes over it, looking closely for faults, then over-marking the boy in his morbid, self-exculpatory anxiety to be fair. Henderson had not yet done his imposition. Bevan had found various reasons for keeping him on the cricket field. But he should do it. He should do it, by God he should! Champernown set his jaw. He would resign, he would pull the whole place up by the roots, sooner than allow that imposition to be evaded.

With an overwrought gesture, he put the pile of exercise books inside the desk, slammed down the lid, and made for the field. Coming out round the corner of the chapel, he ran straight into a small and white-faced procession carrying a limp figure.

'Henderson. . . . In the nets. . . . Ball came smack through . . . I always said that net was dangerous. . . . Full on the temple. . . . Yes, one of Lacey's hardest. . . .'

The whole school, building, playing fields, and all, lay under a cloud till five, when it was announced that the victim was sitting up, declaring that he felt perfectly all right, and

demanding to be allowed to return to ordinary life. The doctor had seen him, and could find no injury.

At about half-past six, Champernown, after long debate, nerved himself to go up to the sick bay and inquire how the boy was getting on. He might even be allowed to see him. After all, why shouldn't he? It was only natural he should want to know. He was the boy's form master.

With beating heart, he went up the leaded stairs, and down the long, bare passage, decorated only with fire extinguishers. Opening the green baize door, he heard voices in the ante-room, and stopped short.

'Very well, then, Matron. Keep him where he is till bedtime, and let him go back to the dormitory.'

'No, thank you, Mr. Bevan. I'm going to keep him where he is all night, and sit up with him too.'

'Really, Matron, I must say, I think you're making too much of this. You've heard Dr. Slater's opinion. Fussing like this will only create a bad impression. The school is quite sufficiently upset as it is. You'd much better let him go down.'

'No, thank you, Mr. Bevan. This is my responsibility.'

'Really, Matron—'

Stepping back, Champernown silently closed the door. It would be injudicious to go in at the moment. He could inquire again later.

He was a little late for breakfast the next morning, and made his way self-consciously up the big hall between the tables, half annoyed and half pleased at the occasional cries of 'Good morning, sir,' which greeted him as he passed. He never knew whether to acknowledge them or not.

When he reached the top table, he noticed with surprise that the headmaster was absent. Only three of the men were there, silent, with long faces.

'Haven't you heard?'

'Heard what?'

'About Henderson.'

'Henderson? What about him?'

'Died in the night.'

'No. . . . Good God!'

'Yes. Sat up suddenly in bed, squinted, cried out, and then fell back dead.'

The room began to spin around Champernown. Half conscious, he heard the hushed voices.

'By Jove, it's a feather in Matron's cap, anyway. Lucky she insisted on sitting up with him. Bevan will be thankful enough to her when it comes to the inquest.'

As soon as he regained proper consciousness of his surroundings, Champernown felt himself unable to eat. He swallowed a few mouthfuls of his coffee, then made his way out. As he did so, he passed the Matron coming in, grimly justified. Two minutes later, he was knocking at the door of the headmaster's study.

'I really can't see you now, Champernown. I'm—that is, there's a great deal to do.'

'I've only just come to tell you . . . to hand in my resignation.'

The man was not listening. His back was turned. He was ferreting among papers. He looked pale, ill, blotchy, and old.

'Yes, yes, yes. Well, come later on, Champernown. I really can't see you now.'

Suddenly Champernown stamped uncontrollably.

'I resign, I tell you,' he shouted. 'I resign! Do you understand? I resign!'

Then he turned round, and ran away, blundering down the passage, talking to himself and sobbing. At a corner, he charged into a colleague. The younger man's pupils contracted to pin-points. He stared after the retreating figure, then uttered a long, low whistle.

'Well,' he exclaimed. 'Whoever would have thought he'd take it like that!'

But Champernown was not weeping for the dead. He was weeping because, in a sudden searing flash, he had seen what his calling had made of him. He did not feel sorrow. He felt simply that Henderson had escaped him, that he had been cheated. In a mad corner of his mind, he would have wished that afternoon to go up to the sick bay, take the corpse, and set it at its desk in the empty class-room, that justice might be satisfied.

THE NICE CUP O' TEA

IN the days of my youth—and they're farther away than I care for—I was colleague and friend to a girl by the name of Mary Coffey. She was a nice girl, with a pleasant manner, passable good looks, and a trim figure, and all of us in the office called her the Nice Cup o' Tea.

When I say she was a nice girl, I use the word in no finical or pedantic sense. She had a pretty sense of humour for a protestant, and what I liked most about her was her skill at repartee. For, though she *was* a nice girl, in the sense of being as good a one as you'd find from one end of Dublin to the other, she was in no way sanctimonious in her speech, nor required it of others. If I fired a dubious observation at her, as many a time I did, of the what-the-soldier-said-to-the-girl variety, she was swift in response, and sometimes shattering. You know the type. A clean, decent, lively girl, straight as a die, with not a spot of harm in her. I liked and admired her and we had great games together.

The best fun we'd have was when I'd let on to tell her fortune. She made a joke of the whole thing, and I played up to it, but underneath she had, like most women, a crumb of belief in it. I was lucky once or twice, guessing what might be coming her way, and soon, bedad, I had her so well persuaded, that I could read her hand and her tea leaves to any purpose I chose. Often when we'd be lunching together, her and me and a friend or two, under pressure from the Nice Cup o' Tea I would exercise my supposed occult faculties, and fill her future with tall dark men and ocean crossings and fair rivals and wealth and plots and the Lord knows what besides.

'Come on,' she'd say. 'Come on now, Maurice. Be a sport. Come on. Good man and true.'

'Ah, Tea dear,' I'd say to her, 'ye don't want to go troubling the future.'

'Come on, Handy-Andy,' she'd say, and put her head on one side—she always had a handsome hat on her: she was a girl looked well in hats—and, of course, I'd succumb.

'You're going on a voyage,' says I, staring into her capable clean hand. 'And then—no.' I put her hand down on the table. 'I can't tell you.'

'Go on, go on, you irritating creature. You must tell me.'

'No. There's some things a man should never say to a girl.'

'Get on, ye gomm.'

I'd take another look. 'Maybe I'm mistaken. No. It's there right enough.' And I'd cover my eyes with my hand and pretend to shudder. 'Show me your teacup,' I'd say. 'Ach, it's there, too.'

Then, when I'd worked her up to the point of slapping my lug for me, I'd come out with some frightful yarn of diamonds, wicked men, and attempts on her, to her unbounded delight and her loud exclamations that I was a disgrace and she'd never speak to me again. Ah, those were happy years for the three or four of us young people, working away there in the railway office. We had little money, and little care.

And then one day, bedad, what does she go and do, in defiance of all me predictions and prognostications, but fall in love with a fella by the name of Bill Hogan. She brought him along one day to lunch to meet the rest of us, and, to tell you the truth, we didn't think too much of him. A solemn stick of a chap we found him, rather on his dignity and apt to own her to us.

'Come, Maurice,' she says to me, when we'd reached the tea and cigarettes. 'You must tell our fortune for us.'

'I don't believe in that,' says Bill Hogan.

'Nonsense, darling,' says she happily. 'Come on, Maurice.'

'Nonsense is right,' intones Bill. 'Nonsense it is, and superstition. I won't countenance it,' says he, 'even the pretence of it.'

She didn't believe him at first and laughed, but he began to get stiff and red, and she saw at last. I felt awkward as the devil. I was cursing him in my mind, and there

was she, with all the light and happiness gone out of her face. If that fella's ears didn't burn after he'd taken her away, they must have been made of asbestos.

And then, bedad, a few days afterwards I found him waiting for me when I came away from work.

'How do ye do,' says he.

'Faith, I'm grand,' says I. 'How's yourself?'

'Very well, thank you.'

He fell in step with me and I could see he had something on his mind. At last he coughed once or twice, and let it out of him.

'I know you mean no harm,' he said, 'and it's levity only; but I'd be obliged if you wouldn't tell Mary any more of those questionable anecdotes. Clandestine sexual indiscipline is no subject for a joke. Thank you. Good evening.'

And he walked away, leaving me gawking after him like a fish.

'Ah,' I finished up after I'd told the others. 'He's a dry devil. There's no fantasy in him. Sure, how could she be happy married to a fella the like of that?'

Well, the weeks went by and the months went by, and by degrees our Nice Cup o' Tea seemed to get over the first novelty of being in love, and things drifted back to something like their old happy state. Our talk and laughter was restored to its former freedom, and though every now and then she'd remember, and clap a hand to her mouth, we'd soon josh her out of it, and there'd be a kind of conspiratorial twinkle in all our eyes as we heedfully circumvented the severity of the absent Bill. We saw little of him, and he faded to the background of our minds.

Now it was a fact that the Nice Cup o' Tea had never been robust in her health. Once or twice in the year she'd be away for maybe a week or ten days, but we never thought much of it. Now, however, she had a couple of baddish goes inside six months, being away for more than three weeks the second time.

It was coming to work in the early winter mornings that tried her, and fagging home again to Dollymount of an evening, standing in the rain by the Pillar waiting for a

tram. We were agreeing on this at lunch one day and, by a natural sequence of events, it brought to our minds the blessed and virtuous Bill Hogan.

'How long is it since she had the understanding with him?' says Billy Dawson—who always took it very hard that Hogan should profane by possession the honest convivial name of Bill.

'A year and more,' says I.

'Eighteen months, if it's a day.'

'Ah, go on.'

Well, we added it up and do you know, it came out incontrovertibly that Bill Hogan and the Nice Cup o' Tea had been earmarked for one another a period of two years, one month, and five days.

This gave us concern. We made it our business to keep observation on Bill Hogan as the weeks went by, and it was given to us forcibly that he was in no kind of a hurry about marriage. Our concern deepened. For all his solemn mug Bill was a fresh complexioned, young-looking man; whereas she had aged materially in looks. I thought it was illness. Billy Dawson thought it was the strain of keeping company to such a stick; but the fact remained, to see him with the Cup o' Tea, you'd have taken him for her younger brother. Until you saw her look at him, that is. There was no doubt, she was oceans deep in love with him.

'If that you-know-what gives her the go-by,' says Billy to me one day, 'I'll poultice him the way his mother wouldn't know him.'

'Sure,' said I, 'he'll never do that. No one could do that.'

But I wasn't too sure. Ah well, it shows how you can misjudge a man.

To resume. Only a couple of weeks after she'd come back, the Cup o' Tea went out sick again. We had no news of her for nearly a week. Then Billy Dawson, who'd been to inquire, came in with the tears on his face. She'd been operated upon, and cancer discovered. It was too late to do anything.

They didn't tell her, of course, but they told Bill Hogan,

and it was he told Billy. While we were still numb with the shock, Bill himself came round to see us. He was the same as ever, with a face like the hinder parts of a furniture van, and we agreed—of course—that we should all pretend to know nothing about it.

Then, when the Cup o' Tea came out from the hospital, shaken and pale and wan, what do you think that poor solemn stick of a lover did? (He was, let me tell you, just a fifth-class clerk earning, if anything, less a month than she.) He immediately demanded her in marriage and their official engagement was announced. He bought her a most expensive ring. He involved himself in buying a house for her and him to live their happy married life in, and their last evenings—maybe thirty such Arcadian evenings—were spent going over the house, with me and Billy often in attendance, deciding how they would arrange it.

'We'll have the gas stove here,' says the Cup o' Tea. 'I think that would be the best place, don't you, Bill? To give the maximum of heat?'

'Yes,' he answers, 'unless we put it over there so as to warm the whole corner.'

'And make an ingle-nook, you mean? Yes. We might do that.'

They'd discuss and settle that, with interruptions, sacred and profane, from the two of us; for Bill seemed to have quite thawed out now. Anything, to make her happy.

'Then we'll put the sofa there,' she says, 'and Mother's big photo can hang there—'

'And the cradle can go there,' says I, and she'd pretend to scold me, and we'd all laugh, and even Bill would force a sort of smile to that stiff, pink-and-white, smooth-shaven gob of his.

Over that house we went, in and out of every room, laughing, coddling, and planning. She was as happy as a bird. I had a lump in my throat often, listening to her. More than once, I had to hang behind and stay in the dark on the stairs or somewhere, till I'd got a proper command of my features.

'Maurice,' she'd call. 'Where *are* you, you tiresome creature?'

And I'd have to pretend to have stayed behind to measure something over again, and be laughed at by her, and called doubting Thomas, and the like.

Bill Hogan was wonderful. My opinion of him rose high in those weeks. Not by the flicker of an eye did he betray that he knew the future they were planning for could never be. He played up to her nobly, and Billy and I did our best too.

And then, one evening, she and I were standing in the kitchen while Bill and Billy went off to fetch a step ladder. We'd been talking a lot about the moving in, now imminent, and the question arose of how a gas tap in the kitchen should be fixed. She fancied one way, Bill and I another.

They went and left us alone, and I was going on saying something about our way of fixing it lasting longer, when suddenly I met her eye. She was looking at me, a smile on her face. The words died in my throat.

She put out her hand and touched mine. Just touched it. 'You didn't see everything in the tea-cup, did you, Maurice darling?' she said.

She knew. She understood what we were doing, she was playing our game with us: and her smile—I see it still in my dreams—her smile asked me not to let on, but to keep up the play to the end.

I could say nothing. I just grabbed her hand and kissed it. Then I heard the others coming back, and had to flee into the scullery and pretend to be busy with the sink, till I got back my composure.

The preparations were done in time. She and Bill were married, and they moved in. They were there together just a week. Then the Cup o' Tea was carried out, and never came back.

Everything had been paid for before they moved in: she was relieved to be sure of that. You see, Bill hadn't dared to suggest hire-purchase, for fear of rousing her suspicions, and she hadn't dared to suggest it to him, for fear of making him suspect she knew. So there he was with the house on his hands. He lived on in that chateau for a couple of months, showing no more feeling than he had at the funeral, and seeing next to nothing of us; so that

we began to wonder could he be so very much cut up after all.

'Maybe,' says Billy to me, 'he just had the good feeling to make her last days happy, and didn't really love her at all.'

'Maybe so,' says I.

But Bill Hogan loved her better than we thought: for, less than three months after her death, the woman who looked after the place found a neat little note on the doorstep warning her to keep away. Bill had stuck up the doorway, turned on the gas, and gone after his Cup o' Tea.

We had the clearing up of matters. Bill had left them all in apple-pie order. The only thing that wasn't paid for was the ring and, after a lot of argument, we got the jewellers to take it back.

Aye, I never told any one's fortune since; and I never will.

XXII

A SHOT IN THE GARDEN

THE long garden drowsed beneath the sunshine of the early August afternoon. There was not a breath of air.

So still was the hour, that the garden seemed isolated from all contemporary life and movement, a world to itself. From the distant road to Dublin came, every few minutes, the sleepy rattle of a tram: but the road was on the far side of the orchard at the top of the garden, and of the house beyond the orchard, so that its sounds were filtered down to a remoteness suggesting long ago, as well as far away.

In the lanes of 'The Dwellin's', rows of unsavoury cottages not quite hidden by General Fitzgerald's tall hedge, a hawker had been crying fish: but his cries had ceased. He was being given a bite and a sup in one of the cottages. Only the memory of his hoarse voice remained to emphasize the stillness.

Then, stealthily, movement came to the garden. The very bottom end of the hedge, at the corner where it made an angle with the screen of sycamores and the bank at the garden's end, rustled, quivered, and parted. A red hand appeared, and a thick red forearm. Warily, the head of Mrs. Joe Cassidy twisted its way through, and examined the garden. Then, the examination being satisfactory, it was followed by the rest of Mrs. Joe Cassidy. Standing erect, she uttered a grunting sigh of relief, pulled her shawl about her shoulders—the hedge had disarranged it—and made her way boldly and leisurely up towards the flower-beds.

As a denizen of 'the Dwellin's', Mrs. Cassidy knew well the General's habits, and those of his establishment. They took their midday dinner at half-past one. Mr. O'Neill, his gardener, would likewise be at his meal, taking it with Biddy the cook in the cool stone scullery. There would be no one to disturb her. Humming to herself a verse of 'The Donegal Widow', to express her satisfaction, Mrs. Cassidy looked about her, and made a start upon the sweet peas. It wanted, she told herself, about twenty minutes to two. She could count upon ten minutes or a quarter of an hour. Time to pluck a really nice bouquet. As she picked, her eye roved to the other flower-beds, and she planned to the best advantage a journey which should bring her back to her gap in the hedge.

'Yo-de-ay, yo-de-o!' sang Mrs. Cassidy, with increasing confidence and satisfaction. 'With my skibbery-wink-i-odle. . . .' She was in luck. She had watched it well, and taken the flowers at their very best. Them gladioluses. Ah, Mr. O'Neill kept his flowers lovely!

Unfortunately for Mrs. Cassidy, however, her visit was not as well timed as she supposed. She could not be blamed: both the contributing factors to her error were out of her control. She was not to know that Cassidy, having knocked the clock down overnight and stopped it, had restarted it by guess-work, so that it was some ten minutes slow. Nor could she know that, as the General had an old crony to lunch, his ten-year-old grandson had been encouraged to leave the table early, so that the conversation of the veterans could take its way unchecked by old Mrs. Fitzgerald's warning

murmur of 'Prenny gard'. The boy had an appointment with Paddy, his fisherman friend, but not till two forty-five. Accordingly, with time on his hands, he borrowed his father's .22 Winchester, and wandered up the orchard towards the garden. What he intended to do he was not quite clear: be content, probably, with an inanimate target, for he had been carefully schooled from shooting birds. But there were always possibilities. There might be a rat by the rubbish heap. Wild cats occasionally invaded the garden; and though he would hardly have dared to shoot at one himself, it was always pleasant to pretend. And, in his favourite Wild West library, *hombres* invariably went armed. So, rifle under arm, he opened the orchard gate, let himself out quietly into the garden, and turned down the path on the left-hand side, farthest from the tall hedge.

It was not until he had gone past the big yew tree that he saw Mrs. Cassidy, and stopped dead in astonishment. So calmly was she helping herself to the flowers, so nonchalant and unashamed was her song, that for a moment he assumed that it was all right, and she had been given permission to pick them by his granny. Otherwise, surely, no one would dare! Least of all a ragged person in a shawl. Yet—it was in the highest degree unlikely that his granny would give any one permission to pick flowers. When she gave a poor woman a nosegay, as sometimes she did, it was one of the poor women who visited the house on some errand, or who worked for her: and she always came out with scissors and basket, and snipped the blossoms herself. No. This, every instinct told him, must be illegal.

What should he do? Run back to the house and summon help? But by then she would have made her escape.

As he stood undecided, an idea struck him. He had a ready method of testing his theory, a method far less embarrassing than going up and accosting the woman. Though at ease, and apparently in good humour, she looked formidable. He felt instinctively that, in Paddy's phrase, he would not be 'able for her'. Accordingly he pointed his rifle into the middle of the potato patch, at nothing, and fired.

The result was dramatic. Mrs. Cassidy's song broke off

as if cut by a knife. With a cry of 'Merciful hour!', abruptly stifled, she jumped, and let fall a couple of blossoms. Turning quickly, she saw the boy looking at her, and holding a rifle. But Mrs. Cassidy's was a life which made one ready for emergencies. After one glance, she looked away, and resumed her humming. Stooping to pick up the dropped flowers, she plucked a few more, and, still humming abstractedly, began to move off slowly but unmistakably towards the hedge.

Though momentarily intimidated, the boy was not deceived. He stood fast, watching her: and reloaded. Sure enough, as the distance between them increased, her pace grew quicker. She did not attempt to pick any more flowers. Now she had passed the summer-house, and reached the hedge. She walked a little way along, stooped down, and straightened up again. The bouquet was no longer visible.

Instantly, he knew what she had done. She had pushed the stolen flowers under the hedge, and would pick them up on the far side when she got out. Indignation rose in him. There she was, getting away, and he was powerless to stop her. She had made a fool of him: robbed his grandfather, with him looking helplessly on: treated him as if he were a child.

With sudden, cold decision, he lifted his rifle, took aim at her broad receding behind, and fired.

This time the effect was even more dramatic. For an instant Mrs. Cassidy stood still, incredulously, and clapped her hand to her behind. Then, realizing what had happened, she set off at a shambling run for the gap at the bottom of the hedge. The boy, watching fascinated, half appalled at his own act, saw her limp along, then suddenly begin to struggle, tearing at the hedge with both hands, groping blindly for the gap. With her shawl hanging loose, she looked like some great brown wounded bird, flapping and struggling. A strange, sobbing, whimpering noise came to the boy's ears, afflicting him with a sick feeling of horror. It sounded so inhuman that he could not at first believe it came from his victim. For poor Mrs. Cassidy had completely lost her self-possession. As soon as she realized she had been shot, she remembered the first bang, and concluded that it too had been aimed at her, but had

missed. The murdering young devil! He would be loading up for a third shot, and this time he would finish her entirely.

'Jesus-Mary-an'-Joseph,' she entreated, in a sobbing gabble, seeking frantically for the gap in the hedge. 'Jesus-Mary-an'-Joseph, Jesus-Mary——'

Then, at last, she found it, and tore herself through to safety.

The boy, as soon as she had disappeared, remembered the flowers. He put down his rifle, and ran on tiptoe to where he had seen her stoop. He must get there, quickly, and secure his evidence, before she came to pick them up.

But Mrs. Cassidy was not thinking any longer about flowers. He found the bouquet, where she had thrust it, half-way under the hedge, snatched it up, and retreated to the middle of the garden. Then, picking up his rifle, he walked slowly towards the orchard and sat for a while on the seat beneath the yew tree, to think things over. He felt shaken and disturbed. Surely, surely he had been justified. Ted and Jack, of his Wild West series, would certainly have done as he did. They invariably winged a thief—especially a skulking thief. And he had not shot to hurt. At that distance . . . and through all those clothes . . . And she was so fat. . . . But—that noise she had made. And the horrid way she had struggled along the hedge. . . .

He was still there, ruminating, when his grandfather came through the orchard gate into the garden. The old man was in great fettle. His friend, whom he had not seen for a year, was showing far more signs of age than he. What was more, at the end of the meal, he had excused himself on the ground that he needed forty winks. The General was not above a seasonable nap himself, but this confession was quite enough to send him out into his garden, full of satisfaction, proving to himself his own alertness and activity and independence of forty winks after a meal.

Seeing his grandfather, the boy rose at once, and went towards him. A gallant soldier, though he might not wholly approve—certain instructions were sounding in his young ears even now—would at least understand.

The old man stopped short at the sight of him.

'Mercy on us, boy,' he exclaimed. 'What ails ye? Ye look as if ye'd seen a ghost.'

The boy held out the bunch of flowers.

'I came out and found a woman stealing these, Grandpapa. So I shot her.'

'So you *what*?'

'I shot her.' Then, as the old man's eye wildly roved the garden for a possible corpse, he added: 'Not badly. Only in the behind.'

The General stood staring down at him, unable to speak.

'She was standing over there, Grandpapa. She didn't see me at first. . . .' And he gave the whole story, softening down Mrs. Cassidy's exit, and once more holding up his evidence, the bunch of flowers.

The general found speech at last.

'I-declare-to-me-God,' he began: then broke into stern denunciation. 'Didn't I tell you, and didn't your father tell you, you were never to point the gun at a person?'

'Yes, Grandpapa. But I thought you meant only in fun.'

'Only in fun!' The old man's blue eyes rolled heavenwards. He seemed in danger of stifling.

'Yes, Grandpapa. She was stealing. Uncle Thady's gamekeeper shoots poachers. Often. You know he does. In the leg. One of them was in hospital for a long time. And I only shot her in the behind. And she was very fat. And it's a very small bullet.'

The old man was about to utter a homily, when something made him cock an ear. Beyond the hedge, over there in the Dwellin's, a murmur was rising, inarticulate and confused: swelling every few seconds: the voices of women upraised in exclamation, the deep rumble of men. He looked down at his grandson.

'Where are you going this afternoon?'

The boy gasped with relief. It had been a terrible effort to keep up this bold, reasonable front. A minute more, and the tears would have come and spoiled everything.

'Down to the Sea-Wall with Paddy,' he replied promptly.

'Off with ye this minute. Don't dawdle, now. Leave me the gun. Go down there and *stay* there.'

Delighted, the boy took to his heels. Holding the rifle, the General watched him go. The orchard gate slammed. The General's mouth relaxed into a grim smile. Then he chuckled. Then he laughed outright. Finally, he had to lay the rifle down, and sit on the seat under the yew tree, to have his laugh out.

At last, drying his eyes on a huge yellow silk handkerchief, he rose, with a glance towards the now clamorous Dwellin's, and went in to meet the remonstrance he knew would soon be forthcoming.

Some half-hour later, sitting in his parlour window, he saw the leaders of the deputation reach the gate. There they hesitated, and waited for the others to join them. Cassidy, a huge fellow with a purple face, was beckoning savagely. Evidently some of the deputation would have liked to back out. Then, when they had all gathered, Cassidy squared his shoulders, opened the gate, and led the way up the short gravel drive.

The General opened the door himself, and met them, standing, an imposing figure, at the top of the steps. He put up his eyeglass, and looked them up and down.

'And to what am I indebted for this honour? What do you and your blackguards mean, marching up to my door like this?' he added, as the first question received no answer.

Cassidy stepped forward, and unwillingly touched the peak of his cap.

'General Fitzgerald, sir,' he began. 'A joke is a joke, as all know, and them that oversteps themselves must take the consequences. But there's such a thing as goin' too far: and, when it comes to drawin' a gun on a poor woman——'

'Aye,' chorused the others, rising to their cue. 'Aye. That's goin' too far altogether.'

'You're drunk, man,' said the General contemptuously.

'Indeed, then, I am not.' Cassidy was indignant. 'It's God's truth I'm telling ye, as all here can witness. Isn't that so, boys?'

'Aye, bedad, it is.'

'Damn the lie in it.'

'Oh, that's the truth, sir.'

The General held up his hand.

'When you're all done bawling at me, maybe I shall hear sense. Now then, Cassidy. What is it you're blathering about?'

'My poor wife, sir. Shot she is.'

'Shot? Where was she shot?'

'In your garden, sir.'

'And what might your wife be doing in my garden? Will you tell me that?'

'Well, General Fitzgerald, sir . . . ' Cassidy shifted from one foot to the other. 'It's the way she went in—mind ye, I'm not saying she had a right: but she was wishful—' The words came fast. 'She has a niece, sir, in the hospital, terrible bad, the poor girl, and cryin' out for a flower. Cryin' out for the sight of one. Ah, says the nurses, if only she could have a flower or so, it would make the turnin' point with her. The turnin' point. And so, thinks me wife to herself, I know the General wouldn't grudge me one, for to help poor Cissy. I won't trouble him, says she, and he at his meals. I'll just skip in, and maybe pluck one or two—'

'And sell them in the streets afterwards, and get the price of a wet. Get on with ye, man. You and your nieces. What sort of a fool do ye take me for? I know you—and you wife too.'

'Ah, General, it's the hard man you are. Sure—'

'And it's the damn liar you are. Get away out of this, you and your nieces, and your fairy stories.'

'Anyway, sir, fairy stories or no fairy stories, there's no reason why my poor wife should be shot. It's upset she is: terrible upset, and bleedin' from the hip.'

'Hip be damned. The boy shot her in the behind.'

'Well, sir, if ye like, in the behind it is. That's hard, sir. That's hard: and she done little harm to earn it.'

'Aye, sir. That's hard.'

'True enough.'

Privately, the General agreed with them: but the voices of Cassidy's supporters stiffened him at once.

'Rubbish,' he declared. 'The woman got what she deserved.'

Cassidy drew himself up.

'There's a laa,' he said with dignity. 'There's a laa in the land, to protect them as is downtrodden. It's——'

The General's face turned the colour of a mulberry.

'Law!' he cried. 'You dare to stand there and talk to me about the *law*! Why, good God in heaven!' The crowd shrank back. He seemed about to explode. 'When have I ever taken the law on any of you blackguards? When have I called in the police, and you robbing me right, left, and centre, every day of my life? When that young devil of Mullins's broke his leg climbing after my Ribstone Pippins, did I hand him over? Did I put the police on your young scallywag of a boy, Rathbone, when I caught him lifting my gooseberries? Did I give your own boy in charge, Cassidy, you ruffian, when I found him with a hatful of my raspberries down there by the summerhouse? I did not, and well you know it. And now you talk of taking the law on a mere child, that was only trying to protect my property for me, the best way he knew how!'

He glared down in majestic scorn upon the throng. Not a man would meet his eye.

'Pon me soul, I'm ashamed of ye. Go on home out of that, this minute, the whole pack of ye. And shut the gate as ye go.'

'Isn't he the grand old divil!' Cassidy was exclaiming a few minutes afterwards. 'The way he put us to the right-about. Oh, he's the boyo! Did you hear what he said to me? 'Hip be damned,' says he. 'It's in her behind she was shot.' Did you hear that? Oh, he's the lad! There never was one could beat him. Do you know what it is? I've a clutch of fresh eggs, only new laid this day. I'll take them up to him this afternoon, and apologize to him.'

And, at the same time, the General sat writing a note to his doctor.

DEAR O'DONOVAN,

'You might, if you would be so good, go to Mrs. Cassidy, in the Dwellings, and make her comfortable. She was in my garden this afternoon, stealing flowers: and my young rascal of a grandson . . .'

So peace was restored, and all was well. Dr. O'Donovan extracted the bullet, which the Cassidys proudly kept as a memento: and the General's garden was left untouched for several weeks. Old Mrs. Fitzgerald, who never could think ill of anybody, claimed this as evidence of 'the Dwellin's' essential goodness of heart. The General loudly maintained that it was due to the dread of being shot. In a word, each side profoundly understood the other, and was well pleased.

XXIII

WEST HIGHLAND INTERLUDE

THE rain had lifted, and everything was still. The sea was pale. Grey rain-clouds hung like shawls over the islands, and drew their fringes softly along the horizon. Inland, the mountains were hidden, save for a single dark peak, projecting oddly from a motionless mass of cloud. The air was close and warm.

We turned, and for the fifth time rowed slowly past the big sunk rock. It was no use. The fish would not bite.

'Let's stop and have tea. Then we'll try again.'

The suggestion was received with relief. The lines were pulled in, and coiled carefully in the stern, the red rubber eels revolving seductively on the last yard of gut. The best rock on the coast, a dull sky, a perfect tide, bright new eels—and we might as well have been dragging them up and down in the bath. It was inexplicable.

Three thermos jugs of tea, marmalade sandwiches, and bannock: there was more than enough for the five of us. We had lost count of time, and discovered that we were very hungry.

'Hullo, Hector. Won't you have anything?'

The old boatman shook his head.

'None to-day, thank you. None to-day.'

'Why not?'

'No use. I am going to the doctor.'

One of the guests, on holiday from Harley Street, looked up sharply.

‘What’s that got to do with it?’

The old man’s craggy face was illumined by a sad, indulgent smile.

‘I losing it.’

The guest looked round.

‘What does he mean?’

‘The doctor—he is giving me a medicine. Once a week. Every Friday. The doctor thinks I do not take the medicine. So he is giving me the first dose himself. Every Friday. So I cannot eat.’

‘I still don’t see.’

The old man’s brow wrinkled as he laboriously translated his thought into the unfamiliar tongue.

‘The doctor’s medicine,’ he said, ‘it is turning my stomach. When I come out of his house, I put it by the roadside. And my tea too.’

The doctor laughed. ‘That’s bad. What about the rest of the week?’

‘Och. That is all right. I am not taking the medicine. I am pouring it on the stones.’

‘But, man’—medical sense was outraged—‘why don’t you tell the doctor the medicine doesn’t suit you, and get him to make you up another?’

‘Och no. He would be angry.’

‘Not a bit of it. You’ve only got to tell him the truth. After all, he can’t know it doesn’t suit you, if you don’t tell him, can he? The one thing we want is for our patients to tell us the truth.’

‘Och no.’ The old man shook his head, gently amused. ‘It is not always good to tell the truth.’

‘But, man, you *must* tell the truth to your doctor.’

‘Och no. It is not always good.’

‘Why not?’

The doctor was getting pink.

Hector looked at him for a few seconds without speaking. Once again, he shook his head slowly.

‘There was—I cannot say it.’ He turned to the son of his employer. ‘A father of a grandfather of a grandfather?’

'Ancestor,' said the boy quickly.

Hector bowed.

'There was an ancestor of my mother learned that it was not good always to tell the truth. Even when you are bidden. He was called Kenneth Mackenzie. He was a singer, and he had the two sights.'

'He had *what*?' asked the doctor.

'Second sight,' the boy interpreted.

'Oh! Thought he meant he saw double. Dare say he did, sometimes, what?'

'He had the second sight,' continued the old man. 'The laird was away in Europe. One day, the laird's wife called for Kenneth Mackenzie.'

"Tell me," she said. "Can you see the laird?"

'So Kenneth shut his eyes, and waited till the half-sleep came to him. When the half-sleep came, he said, "Yes. I can see the laird."'

"Where is he?" said the laird's wife.

"He is in France, in the town of Rouen," said Kenneth. "He is making his way home."

"That is good news," said the laird's wife. "Tell me more. Can you see what he is doing?"

"Aye," said Kenneth. "I can see what he is doing."

"Well?" said the laird's wife.

"I think," said Kenneth, "I will not say any more."

"Indeed and you will," said the laird's wife. "You will tell me the truth."

"Well," said Kenneth. "The laird is in a big room, sitting by the fire."

"Yes?"

"He is with a very beautiful young lady, and she is sitting on his knee."

"What!" said the laird's wife, in great anger. "Do you dare to say such a thing about the laird, you wicked man?" And she called to the people and said: "Bring tar and feathers."

'So they brought tar and feathers, and they stripped Kenneth of his clothes, and put the tar on him, and the feathers.'

"Kill me if you will," Kenneth cried to the laird's wife, "but do not dishonour me."

"You dishonoured the laird," said the laird's wife, "by speaking lies of him."

"I spake no lies!" said Kenneth. "It is the truth."

"What!" the laird's wife cried out: and she took a torch with her own hand, and set a light to Kenneth, and burned him."

There was a silence. The doctor laughed uneasily.

"I say. That was pretty tough."

'Presently,' the old man resumed, 'the laird came home. As soon as he had eaten and drunk, he asked for Kenneth.'

"Och," said his wife, "Kenneth is dead." Then, quickly she came and sat on his knee, and put her arms around his neck. "Do you know what he said about you?" she asked him. "He said that you were coming home through Rouen, in France."

"That is true," said the laird. "I came through Rouen."

"He said you were sitting in a big room, beside a fire"

"Aye," said the laird. "That is so."

"But do you know what he said besides? He said that in the room there was a very beautiful young lady, and she was sitting on your knee."

"Aye," said the laird, and he stroked his beard. "Aye. She was that."

'So,' concluded the old man, 'it was the truth Kenneth told, and it did him no good to tell it.'

He leaned over the side of the boat, spat carefully, and relapsed into aloofness, going at once a hundred miles from those in the boat, his face worn and fissured like a rock, without expression.

The doctor, finishing his tea, studied him surreptitiously for a while, then turned to his host.

'I say,' he whispered. 'Is all that true, or was he pulling our legs?'

Before an answer could be given, something extraordinary happened. There was a sound seaward, and a chill blast of air came suddenly from the north-west. The sea blurred, frowned, and rushed, chattering angrily, towards the boat. The wind caught her, and slewed her violently round. She shied like a living thing. Small waves, concentrated and rapid, slapped her side.

With a petulant, cawing outcry, more like a gull's than a man's, old Hector came out of his trance.

'Aaach!' he exclaimed, 'that is why there were no fish. Row, Mr. Peter.'

The boy seized the other oar, and, between them, they steadied the now plunging boat, and swung her round. Already, after less than a minute, it was blowing hard, and bitterly cold. With exclamations of dismay, the others put away the tea things, and huddled down as best they could from the wind.

They had only half a mile to go, but, before they came in, they were drenched and half frozen. After five minutes or so, the inrush of cold air had condensed the warm cloud-masses, and a pitiless rain whipped the fugitives. Thankfully they reached the little natural harbour, and ran shivering across the fields, to whisky and hot baths.

Meanwhile old Hector, imperturbable, without change of expression, moored the boat, took up the oars, rowlocks, and floor boards, hid them safely in a crevice among the rocks, and went off unhurried to his useless tryst with the village doctor.

XXIV

MR. KERRIGAN AND THE TINKERS

MR. TOBY KERRIGAN is a publican. For forty-six weeks of the year he presents to fellow-parishioners and travellers the picture of a humdrum prosperous vintner. The remaining six are his own.

They begin always in the same way. On the first day, Mr. Kerrigan contracts a cold, and takes strong waters to ease it. By the start of the second week, he has sampled all his stock, and decided that brandy serves him best. By the start of the third week, the cold is cured, but the patient feels exhausted, and uses champagne to tone up his system.

During this third week it is customary for Mr. Kerrigan

to make his will, to quarrel with Ted Keogh his foreman, to reward his messenger boy with lavish tips, to create deep interest among the bookies, to wax devotional and, towards nightfall, to offer free hospitality to his customers. This trait being well known, the inn is crowded during the six days in question: and Mr. Kerrigan fills many a stomach, and replenishes many a pocket, being only protected from giving his all away by the devoted Ted Keogh, who has had his notice a dozen times already since Monday, and will get it a dozen more before Saturday night.

And the customers, even those hardy devils the tinkers from Rathnew, approve the devotion of the dark hatchet-faced fellow, who sees to it that they only get a tithe of what his master tries to give them. Not that they would intentionally strip him bare. There is great decency in the world, and if a man under the influence tries to give you too much, sure, you slip it back into his pocket when he isn't looking. Still, it is well for the place that Ted Keogh is in it.

At the start of the fourth week Mr. Kerrigan decides to expedite his convalescence by a mixture of champagne, brandy, and port, until the morning comes when he declines to get out of bed. At this stage Ted Keogh seeks medical aid, whereupon, if all goes well, Mr. Kerrigan leaves his residence in a cab, en route for an institution which specializes in such cases. Ten days or a fortnight there, and he returns purified and braced for the labours of another year.

He assures his intimates that the six weeks' divagation does him a power of good, and seldom costs more than a hundred pounds sterling. As he is a bachelor, and spends next to nothing for the rest of the year, this does not seem an unreasonable figure.

Although this is the normal course of what is locally known as 'Toby's divarsion', there are variations. These depend on the accuracy with which Ted Keogh judges when to fetch the doctor. Mr. Kerrigan has an almost psychic faculty of knowing when the visit is due; it is only safe to send when he is incapable. If Ted mistimes the summons, or the doctor delays in answering it, the patient is liable to escape. Once he is away, there is no knowing what he will do.

The outstanding oddity about Mr. Kerrigan, all the time, is that he seems entirely sober, restrained, and composed: and this, coupled with a lunatic inventiveness, and the fact that he usually manages to take a good deal of money with him, makes him quite untraceable until the diversion burns itself out and he chooses to come home.

One year he got to Dublin, and met in a pub there an army officer similarly afflicted. Next morning the pair flew to Berlin, and no more was heard of them till they rode bare-back into Antwerp on two enormous cart horses. What they had done in the meantime, and how they had acquired these mounts, never transpired.

On another occasion Mr. Kerrigan and two gentlemen friends went from home in a trawler with some drink and several cases of patent medicine as their sole luggage. With the aid of the drink they overcame captain and engineer, and the subsequent gyrations of the trawler off the Hebrides occasioned much anxiety in the herring industry, and a good deal of speculation in the lesser Scottish newspapers. The trawler's voyage was ended—with some difficulty—by the intervention of a torpedo destroyer, whose astounded captain found her going round and round off Eigg in ever-widening circles.

But the best escapade of all, the one in which no word was heard of him for sixteen days and nights, was when he was all the time in his own country. Escaping from his locked bedroom what time Ted sought the doctor, with characteristic cunning Mr. Kerrigan kept clear of Dublin and made for the hills. Travelling via Mr. Doyle's licensed premises in Bray, the Cuckoo's Nest in Glencullen, and the Red Cow in Roundwood, he fetched up towards nightfall at a little mountainy tavern not far from Glendalough.

His money was all but gone, there having been, at that early hour of the day, no more than seventeen and eightpence in the till: and, owing to his hurried departure, neither his attire nor his mien invited confidence. So, after a drink or two, he found himself some forty miles from home, ill-clad, footsore, penniless, and possessed of a thirst well on in the tertiary stage.

Accordingly, he beckoned the publican aside, and in

faltering tones explained who he was. The publican, who had come very reluctantly in answer to his summons, received his tale with open unbelief.

'Kerrigan how are ye!' he exclaimed. 'You're no more Kerrigan than I am.'

Mr. Kerrigan flogged his unwilling mind to function.

'Did ye never see me?' he got out at length.

'I did not.'

'Then how do you know I'm not meself?'

'Doesn't the world know Kerrigan for a neat and decent man, is spruce in his clothing? Ah, no. Ye'll have to think of a better one than that.'

Kerrigan pleaded and asseverated, but the man backed away, denying him all and every sort of aid, even to a sup on credit.

Kerrigan sat down again and stared at the oil lamp which was the tavern's sole illumination. It was smoking. He was about to point this out to the landlord, but let his hand drop miserably to his side. What did it matter anyway? He was done. He was cleaned out. He was jerked. The sooner he was out of a harsh, dry, unfamiliar world the better.

As he sat, gloomily canvassing in his mind the relative merits of a safety razor blade in his pocket, a dive into the lake from St. Kevin's Bed, and a repast of deadly nightshade, a plant which grows so freely in the valleys, his attention was drawn by a demented racket in the lane outside. He had scarcely focused it, when the door was burst open, and a party of tinkers made tempestuous entry.

'Tinkers,' said Mr. Kerrigan to himself dully. 'Rathnew tinkers': and sank back into torpor.

The mountainy landlord's jaws dropped. It was just on closing time, but the visitors were many, and in a dangerous state of excitement. To refuse them would certainly mean trouble. Remembering unhappily that the nearest policeman was seven miles away, he screwed his face into a look of pleasure, and came forward to serve them.

From time immemorial, Rathnew has been the capital of the Wicklow tinkers. These people set out on their annual trek about the month of April. The men dealing in

horses and asses, the women and children collecting rags and bottles but mostly begging, they go by the old tribal road via Roundwood, Luggala, Kattygollagher and the Bride's Glen, for the free grazing they can get on the hills, and the general immunity from interference by the police, and take occasion, mostly unlawful, to descend upon the suburbs and metropolis. To describe them in detail would strain belief: but for squalor, hardihood, impudence, fecundity, robust health, combativeness, and freedom from moral prejudice, the Rathnew tinkers are celebrated within the four coasts of Ireland.

Their leader strode into the tavern some twenty seconds behind his vanguard. Kerrigan, sunk in his apathetic dream, recognized him without emotion. Hugh O'Leary stood six foot three, as magnificently built a man as you could hope to see. His head and face were almost entirely covered in wild, matted red hair and a beard that grew almost up to his eyes. These were grey, and alight with flashing devils of mirth and anger, one staring outwards from its fellow, so that even in his most amiable moods the man looked terrible. What could be seen of nose and brow was covered with freckles, as were his big hairy forearms and his large hands. A deep resonant voice and teeth like a horse's completed the picture of as formidable a brawler and drinker and swearer of oaths as ever overawed a Petty Sessions.

Acknowledging the landlord's greeting with a nod—he knew his power—Hugh called in his laughing, shouting followers and ordered porter all round. Old cunning twisters, middle-aged men, growing lads, slatterns, expectant mothers crowded in with great excitement and animation, for they had come a long and dusty road.

Red Hugh was served first, but, from some scruple of etiquette, he did not drink till each one held a glass. Then he lifted his.

'Slainté, min,' he bellowed, and with an answering bellow all drank deep.

Hugh did not check till he had drained his glass. He banged it on the counter, and demanded a refill all round. Then, while the glasses were filling, he looked round with

insolent contempt upon the few regular customers, who were making themselves as small as they knew how.

One man, however, did not shrink from that intimidating cross-eyed gaze; and that was Mr. Kerrigan. Not from hope or hardihood, but sunk in such gloom he no longer cared what happened, he looked back at Hugh as a pinioned bullock might look upon the slaughterer.

Hugh's eyes gleamed in joyful amazement.

'Begod!' he cried. 'Min—will ye look who is in it! If it isn't ould bloody Kerrigan. The sound and decent man.'

He rushed across the room, seized the befuddled Toby, pulled him to his feet, and kissed him noisily on both cheeks.

'An' what in the name of the sivin snotty orphans is he doin' here! Wid ne'er a collar nor tie and three days' beard and his shoes in tatters! Him that could buy up the three lakes, St. Kevin's Bed, this bloody pub and all, and not feel the weight gone from his pocket! Tell me, Toby, avic, avore—what are you doin' here? What ails ye?'

Coming to himself with an effort, Mr. Kerrigan clutched his arm, made him sit beside him, and explained his plight.

The tinker leaped to his feet.

'Be Jasus, min! yez all know decent ould Kerrigan, the man that never refused us bite or sup, and treated us often when we were low in substance.'

'Aye.'

'Sure we know him well.'

'Good ould Kerrigan.'

They crowded sympathetically round, the women signifying with their looks that Mr. Kerrigan had only to ask.

'Well,' roared Hugh, 'Lord alone knows how he got here, but here he is, sunk in the bloody horrors; and this goshawk here'—he turned and glared fiercely upon the cowering landlord—'this weasel's pup wouldn't stretch out a hand to help or cure him.'

A howl of execration went up from the listeners, and one of the mothers-to-be advocated, in tones of savage relish, a painful surgical operation as the best way to 'mend' the landlord. She was silenced by O'Leary.

'Min. Yez all know me, Red Hugh, bloody ould Red Hugh. Mr. Kerrigan's a decent man. Many's the pint and

many's the bob we've had off of him when they were badly wanted. Well now, min—fair play's a jewel.'

He plunged a hand down inside his shirt, and after some struggling hauled out a large black greasy leather bag. He opened it, and spilled out on the counter a heap of golden sovereigns.

A hush fell on the crowd. The landlord leaned forward, transfixed, his eyes bulging with avidity.

Gathering up a fistful of the coins, O'Leary let them fall in a jingling shower upon their fellows.

'Do you see that?' he savagely asked the landlord. 'Is that good enough for ye, ye badger's caul?'

Moistening his lip, speechless, the landlord nodded. Hugh shoved a tall glass under his nose.

'Fill that with brandy, so.'

The landlord filled it. Hugh took it to Mr. Kerrigan, shoved it into his unsteady hand, then, returning to the counter, scraped up the gold in his enormous paws and poured it into Kerrigan's hat.

'There y'are, sir. Hugh O'Leary remembers them as has been good to him. The arse may be outta me britches, but I've the price of another pair: and no bloody man or woman of yez all will go short while I'm above the sod.'

Slowly, deliberately, Mr. Kerrigan drained the brandy. It was the Hippocrene remedy, and it revived him. He looked at the gold, at Hugh O'Leary and his entourage. He looked at the landlord. He smiled grimly.

'Bring me a pen,' he said.

Hugh laid a restraining hand on his arm.

'No matter, now. No matter.'

'Yes. Leave me set my hand to it while I'm able.'

The pen being produced, in a dead silence Mr. Kerrigan counted fifty sovereigns from the pile. There were many more, but the rest he pushed away and returned to their protesting owner. Then, with a brief calculation as to the present cash value of gold, he wrote O'Leary a formal I O U for sixty-three pounds, payable on demand in his own shop in town.

Until this transaction was completed, his manner was severe and authoritative. The moment it was done, and the

IOU safe in the bag with the remainder of the money and restored to its nest in O'Leary's person, all care fell from him. He ordered several more brandies for himself and O'Leary, and bought drinks all round. He delivered himself of a long speech in praise of O'Leary, comparing him with the publican to the latter's grave disadvantage. He volunteered to sing 'The West's Awake', and carried it through, barring a difficulty with the words, to tempestuous applause.

He purchased a dozen tins of bully beef, fourteen of salmon, three stones of sugar, a gross of loaves, a tub of salt butter, all of which he presented to the tinkers. He lavished booze on them, he demanded the attendance of all the women and children, and distributed to them sweets and cloth and snuff and baubles, more than their most delirious visions could conceive. He snapped his fingers, cleared the floor, and executed an intricate *pas seul*, ended by a devastating crash among some barrels.

Set on his feet again by loving hands, he called for music. Accordion and fiddle appeared as if by magic, the little smoky pub resounded to 'The Hare Was in the Corn', every one danced, beer and whisky puddled the floor, the women quarrelled, the children screamed, a Bedlam rose that was heard a mile away. It was a marvellous evening. The tinkers never forgot it: they have a ballad about it to this day.

When daylight came up the mountain-side, the pub was still, except for the sound of snoring. The landlord, in terror lest report should bring the police, left the sleepers as long as he dared, then woke them.

O'Leary was up at once, alert as the day. With a single shove, he sent the landlord sprawling among the wreckage of his own bar. Uttering a roar that shook the few remaining glasses, he roused his followers; and, a few minutes later, Mr. Kerrigan, still partly on Olympus, left arm in arm with O'Leary for the tents and pavilions of that potentate.

Reaching their base, the tinkers protested that they needed yet more sleep, which their leader graciously granted. Noon next day saw the tribe in their carts and caravans on the way to Kattygollagher, Mr. Kerrigan mounted on a scraggy

donkey beside his host, looking for all the world like Sancho Panza beside a robust Quixote. And, for the next week and more, what time his friends and the police searched for him in likely and unlikely places, watching the ports and even enlisting the aid of Scotland Yard and of the Continental police, Mr. Kerrigan, free from care, very happy, and, in spite of himself, well on the way to recovery, dwelt among the tinkers not ten miles from his own door.

Inured to a humdrum life, he found great delight in these days. Tutored by O'Leary, he acquired eleven ways of snaring rabbits, learned to raise a hare, and make a variety of savoury stews in a tin can. After a fortnight, he was in glowing health, and highly popular with the tinkers, not only because of his open-handedness, but because of his innate decency. He had enjoyed himself on many a jag before, but these were the first sober pleasures he had known: and well he liked them.

Then, one evening, he knew in his bones that the holiday was over. He was sitting with Hugh by the fire, saying little, as his custom was, till at last he fell silent.

The tinker, a man of subtle feeling, fell silent too.

'Hugh,' said Kerrigan at last.

'Toby.'

Kerrigan tried to go on, but the words stuck. He heaved a sigh, looked at his friend, and they smiled at one another.

'I must go, Hugh.'

The tinker was too good a man to vex his guest.

'If ye must, ye must. But are ye sure?'

'I'm after taking stock of my money, Hugh, and it's down low. To seven pounds or so.'

'But'—the tinker's hand went instantly towards his hidden bag.

'No. Sure I know what you're going to say, and I appreciate it. There's nothing I'd like better nor to stay with you.'

He looked around on the sweep of the land, with the woods smoking in the distance, and the dim shapes of the mountains.

'It's a grand life you have,' he went on. 'But I've my work, and my responsibilities. The decent man that works for me and keeps the place going: sure I can't leave him

any longer. Ye see the way it is. I've had the best time with you ever a man had. Leave me go back now, and come to you again.'

'Well—on them conditions, I'll leave ye go.'

They shook hands on that, very soberly.

'Ye see, I'm bred to the other life. This is a grand holiday, and I'd liever keep it so.'

'Aye.'

'There's another thing, too.' Mr. Kerrigan's face took on a deeper shade. 'The judy above—'

'Molly?'

'Aye. If I don't go soon, faith, I'll be getting . . . I mean . . . I'd best go while I can.'

Hugh tried to keep his face. Then he suddenly threw back his head and gave a roar of laughter.

Mr. Kerrigan regarded him with a shy, sad smile.

'It sounds queer to you, I dare say. But—'

'Say no more.' Hugh sprang up, and clapped him on the shoulder. 'We're a pack of wanderin' divils, and you are a man of substance and respectability. You'll do well not to be tangled up with our like. Off with ye now, and open your door to us when we pass near you in a month or three. And come to us again when ye need a holiday.'

'I will so. I will so.'

Mr. Kerrigan rose, shook hands with Hugh again, went off to his tent, summoned Molly, kissed her, dried her tears with his sleeve, and handed her three of his remaining sovereigns. Her sorrow forgotten, she grabbed them like a monkey. Then, his last doubt set at rest, he took his leave of O'Leary, and, accompanied by a cheering escort, went down by Ballycorus to the road and civilization.

Arrived back in the inn, he presented the aggrieved Ted Keogh with a handsome tip, and took his place behind the bar. His friends and customers, who had learned to keep silent on such occasions, congratulated him sincerely on his sun-tanned face and general look of robust health: and all was well.

COMING TO TEA

HE met her on the doorstep. The girl's face changed to surprise at the sight of him.

'I saw you from the window,' he said. 'Did she—did she ask you to tea?'

'Yes. Have I come on the wrong day, or something?'

'No. No. No. I didn't know you were coming. I could have sent you a message—wired, or telephoned. But I didn't know.'

Then, seeing the perplexity in her face, he cried: 'My dear—she's dead.'

'Dead!' The girl recoiled a step. 'But . . . I didn't even know she was ill.'

'She wasn't. At least . . . It was very sudden. They rang me up at the Museum, but I wasn't there. It was some time before they got me. I came at once, of course. She was still alive, but unconscious. She passed away peacefully. Her breathing just got fainter and fainter and——'

He finished with a little forlorn gesture.

'I'm most terribly sorry.' Sincerity rang in the girl's voice. The colour flooded back to her face. 'I——'

'No. Don't go.' He put out a hand as if to clutch at her. 'Stay and have tea with me. Please. I'm all alone. Esther's away on a cruise. She doesn't know, of course. She won't know. In fact,' he stared at her with a half-shocked expression, 'she won't even be here for the funeral.'

The girl stood, unhappy, undecided. He came down a step and stood beside her.

'Please come in. I haven't seen any one, except the doctor and the landlady. Mr. Finch—he's her solicitor, you know—he can't come. Not till to-morrow. But he's making all the—the arrangements.' He looked earnestly into her face. 'Do come in. They are just going to bring tea.'

Turning from her, without waiting for an answer, he

hurried up the steps, clicking his fingers. With an embarrassed little grimace, she followed him.

He plunged in at the open door of the sitting-room, recollected himself, came out again, and stood to usher her in.

'In here,' he muttered.

Her manner was stiff and awkward. She knew him quite well, of course. He had been there several times, with his mother, and once they had dined and gone to a cinema together: but she had never been with him alone. And, for the moment, she did not want to be with anybody. She wanted to go away quietly somewhere, by herself, and try to digest the news.

'Won't you sit down?'

'Thank you.'

To compose herself, she looked around the familiar room. Every object reflected the quiet personality of the old lady who had owned it. The high-backed rocking-chair by the fireplace, with the grey Shetland shawl folded neatly across its back; the old Irish prayer-chair, with its sconces, drawn up to the oddly carved writing-table in the window; the silver-covered blotter, the ivory-handled pen with the J nib, the squat solid cut-glass inkpot, which rested upon it; everything was as it had been on countless visits she had paid before.

Mr. George stood, clicking his fingers. She looked at him. He started, as if in self-reproach.

'To be sure,' he said. 'I'm forgetting.'

He went over and rang the bell. An awkward silence followed, broken at last by the maid's footsteps on the tiled hallway.

'One more cup, please, Elsie. And some more bread and butter.'

The maid looked reproachfully at him, and even more reproachfully at the girl; compressed her lips; and withdrew. There was another silence.

The girl sat, her hot fingers nervously entwined.

'I can hardly believe it,' she said. 'I shall miss her most frightfully. No——' She made an impulsive movement towards him. 'That was a terribly selfish thing to say, when you——'

'No, no, no. Go on. I like to hear you.'

The words would not come. She swallowed, and sketched a helpless gesture. He was looking at her, nodding, with an odd enthusiasm.

'Isn't it a grand thing,' he blurted out, 'when an old lady and a young girl are such friends? She thought the whole world of you. Oh, yes, she did. Many's the time she's said to me: "I've got Joan coming to tea. We're such friends. She makes me feel young again."'

'Don't!' The girl clasped her hands tightly together.

He continued, unheeding. "'She confides in me so. She tells me all her troubles, and all the troubles of the family at home.'"

'I did, indeed.' She looked up at him earnestly. 'And it wasn't like confiding in an old person at all. She was so young in mind. She'd been through such a lot, and yet she could always remember what it felt like to be young.'

'She had been through a lot, as you say. Indeed she had.' He sighed, and fingered his chin. His finger made a rasping noise, and she saw that he was badly shaven, in patches.

'A terrible lot, she had been through,' he repeated, but, even as he was speaking, the breath went out of his voice, and his look became vague again. He sighed, and began wandering about the room.

Then the high heels once more clicked in the hall, and Elsie, still reproachful, brought in the extra tea-things. He waited, till she went: sighed again: fumbled abstractedly with teapot and cups for a moment, and put them down. The girl waited, then, after a glance at his face, quietly possessed herself of the teapot, and poured out for them both.

He gave a start of surprise. 'Thank you. Oh, thank you. No, thanks. I don't want anything to eat.'

'You must,' she said quietly. 'You'll have such a lot to see to. You must take care of yourself.'

He picked up a piece of bread and butter, folded it over, raised it half-way to his lips, and set it down. 'You're right,' he said. 'She did go through a lot.' Then, as if he had made up his mind, he turned to her abruptly. 'You know her story, don't you?'

'I think so,' she murmured. 'Some of it, at least.'

'She's told you about her home, I expect. For that matter, there are the photographs of it.' He swung a hand vaguely towards the wall. 'Well, her maiden name was Donovan, and her father was a general—that's him, on the right of the mantelpiece; and they lived in a lovely old house called Bohanestown, some miles from Dublin. They entertained a great deal, and moved in the best society. Then, when she was over on a visit in London, she met my father. He was a man of good family, but, through no fault of his own, he was in a very subordinate position. His father had died when he was only a boy, leaving him with a mother and a sister to support: and he had to take the first work he could get.

'Well—when my mother announced that she was going to marry him, there was the most terrible scene. You can't imagine the snobbery of a good Irish Protestant family of that time. Simply can't imagine it. The general raved and swore, and ordered her to give Father up. Mother—can you imagine her giving any one up?—Mother did her best to make the old man see reason, for she loved him too, and he adored her. But he would not. So they made a run-away match of it. The old man was beside himself with fury. He never forgave them.

'So Mother had to come over here, and live in a poky little house in the suburbs, and be poor, and cook, and scrub, and mend, and do her own washing and ironing—she who had always had maids and the best of everything. And, worst of all, she had to put up with being looked down upon by people she would never even have heard of at home. But she never complained. She won through. And—you know all she did for us.'

The girl nodded. He picked up his teacup, and put it down very carefully on the edge of the table. The girl watched it in an agony, afraid he would knock it off.

'She had to watch every penny. Funny folk. Even after Father died, they never really forgave her. Eh?'

'Your cup?'

'My cup? Oh yes. Thank you.' He moved it into safety.

'She was marvellous to me,' the girl began in a low tone: but he stood up, interrupting her.

'Will you come in and see her?'

She fought with a momentary fear, then, ashamed of herself, since he so plainly wanted her to come, she nodded.

They went together into the square high bedroom, hushed and close with the indefinable stuffiness of death. He crossed to a window and pulled up a blind. A beam of light pierced the yellow gloom, and fell straight upon the face of the old lady on the bed.

The girl caught her breath. The face and body had a stillness that was not the aggressive stillness of so many corpses, but was all peace. Thirty years had been smoothed from the face. It was serene, smooth as water at dawn, and there was at the corners of the mouth the lightest hint of a smile, just as though she had fallen asleep dreaming of Bohanestown, as it was in the days of her youth, hearing voices and laughter from the croquet lawn, and the bark of her old spaniel Skip as he frolicked and gambolled round her feet, delighted to escape into the green garden after the rain.

Yet, if she had fallen asleep dreaming of such things, she was not dreaming of them now. The peace of the face was beyond that. Happiness and unhappiness were nothing to it any more. Remote, ineffable, its peace reproved the pity which the girl had brought. It was she, with her sorrows and joys before her, who was to be pitied: she, and the bereaved man at her side.

She turned, and saw him, forlorn, bewildered, his hair greying at the temples, standing there fingering his chin, a lost middle-aged man, deprived of his guide and comforter. His mother had been everything to him. He would not know what to do now that she was gone.

Seeing him so forlorn, all the emotion dammed up in the girl broke loose. The hot tears stung her eyelids. Suddenly, without warning, she put an arm round him, pulled him to her, and kissed him. Then she rushed out of the room, across the hall, and down the steps, the glare and green of the street a dazzle before her swimming eyes.

XXVI

HERE'S SOMETHING YOU WON'T PUT IN A BOOK

OLD Kate McCann straightened up and passed the back of her hand across her brow, leaving a smear of peat on the brown, wrinkled skin. She glanced to where the sun was struggling to break through, and uttered a grunt of consternation. She would be late. John would scold her, and, worst of all, Mary would be hurt. Kate stooped, grasped the heavy sack of turf, and with an adroit twist slung it on her back. She bent forward, and started at a rapid shuffle for the whitewashed cottage three hundred feet below.

No sign of her anxiety appeared upon her face. Broad like an Eskimo's, and tanned to the semblance of leather, it was almost incapable of expression. On the rare occasions when Kate smiled, her wide mouth grew wider, and her eyes puckered: but that was all. At other times, her face remained impassive, as though it had experienced nothing but the weather.

As she set her feet in the steep track down the hillside, Kate raised her eyes to scan the path that led across the fields to her home.

It was her daughter she was expecting, home for her annual holiday from the city. When she was fourteen, Mary had gone as a maid to the big house at Ardullan. Her soft voice and her intelligence had won the favour of Lady Sheila, who took her to the city, and eventually found her a place as lady's maid to one of her friends.

When she reached the level ground in front of the cottage, the old woman looked up once more, her brow wrinkling into ridges, and saw the path empty still. With a grunt of relief, she dropped the sack of turf. Maybe she would have time, now, to chop that log? There must be a good fire for Mary: she felt the cold after the big city.

Yes. There would be time to chop the wood. She got

an axe, and, with blows skilfully directed and powerful as a man's, she chopped the log into lengths that would fit the hearth. She gathered an armful of the cut wood, and shuffled indoors to put on the fine jersey Mary had sent her at Christmas.

She was ready just in time. Old John had gone off, duly smartened up, in his navy blue peaked cap and reefer coat, to meet his daughter: and a neighbour had lent a trap to bring her from the station. When Kate, her mouth quivering into a grin, came out to the little green space in front of the cottage, John and the girl were only fifty yards away.

There was something wrong. The old woman could see that at once. John was a little in front, carrying the suitcase, an expression of embarrassed perplexity on his face. Mary, instead of running on ahead as at every other return, was walking behind him.

When she caught sight of her mother, the girl hesitated. Then, at the last moment, she ran impulsively forward, flung her arms around the old woman's neck, and burst into a passion of tears.

'There, there.' Mechanically Kate continued to pat her shoulder, and comfort her, as she led her into the little cosy room: but her heart was full of dismay, for never, since she was a tiny child, had Mary been known to cry like this. Something terrible must have happened, to break her up this way.

'There, there, my little one. There, my pet. What is it? Tell your mother. There. You are tired, from the long journey. Sit now, while I wet you a cup of tea. You are tired. That is it.'

Catching eagerly at the explanation, she hurried to the hearth. Mary's voice jarred her relief. It was cold and hard.

'I am not tired,' she said.

'But you will take a drop of tea. And a scone. Look—here is the honey.'

'No, thank you. I couldn't touch a thing.'

Kate's mouth dropped open. She stared at her daughter. It was a ritual of each year's homecoming that, immediately

on arrival, Mary should sit down to her favourite childhood dish of scones and honey.

Old John spoke.

'She has been this way all the time. I do not know what has come to her. She would hardly greet the neighbours on the station.'

'It's not a thing one could say in front of the neighbours,' rejoined Mary bitterly.

'Well,' said the old man. 'You are at home now, with no neighbours to hear. What is it that has happened?'

Mary was silent for a moment. Then she buried her face in her hands.

'We are ruined,' she sobbed. 'We are disgraced. I can never hold up my head, or look the neighbours in the face again.'

'Why,' cried the old man. 'What are you saying?'

Mary looked up, her face distorted.

'You remember Mr. Renton? Who came last year to Ardullan?'

'The writing gentleman?' said her father. 'He is there now. He came the other day.'

'The writing gentleman.' There was a bitter emphasis on the words. 'Well. He has disgraced us for ever.'

'Disgraced us? How can that be?'

'He has put us in a book, and it is on sale, and people are reading it and thinking shame of us.'

They gaped at her. Old John's bushy brows came down, almost hiding his eyes.

'I don't understand ye. Do you mean he has named us in his book?'

'He has made up a story in which there are people, not called by our name, but so described, they and their house, that all can see plainly it is ourselves he means.'

'But—what is the harm of that? He can't report ill of us.'

'Can he not! First of all, he can tell the story of Alexander, and make him out a worse coward than he was.'

'Alexander!'

The old man flushed as if he had been struck. This was an old wound, the story of a son of his who was his son no

more: a story of a squall and an overturned boat and a man who had committed the one sin unforgivable in a fishing village—the sin of saving his life at the expense of his companions. The scandal had been ended with the departure of the survivor, and all had united to forget him.

Old John drew a deep breath. 'That is terrible,' he said.

'It is not all,' Mary said. 'There is worse.'

'Worse? Why, what worse could there be? Nothing else has happened us.'

'No. But he could make up a thing, and fix it on us.'

'Make up a thing?'

'Yes.'

'About me? About your mother? What could he say?'

'Not about either of you. About me.'

'About *you*!' The two old people looked at each other. They were angry now. The first news had stunned them: but this, an attack on their Mary, of whom they were so proud!

'What did he say?'

'I can't tell you.'

'Ye must tell me, girl! What did he say?'

'He—he said that I am not your daughter.'

For a second or two the meaning did not reach John's mind. Then he turned crimson, swallowed, and shook all over. Mary looked up.

'Yes, father. That is what he has done. He has described us for all to see, put in about Alexander, which every one knows to be true: and written this lie, which every one will think to be true too.'

'But our neighbours—they will know it is a lie.'

'The old folk, yes. But what about the young people? And the visitors?'

Kate said nothing. The two sat there, looking uncomprehendingly at what seemed to them the depth of human baseness. The mind and purpose of the novelist lay outside their ken. They saw only a treacherous wrong done to them, who had never harmed him or wished him anything but good. They were stunned.

Next day, walking with his hostess's daughter, Renton passed close to the cottage. He caught sight of the old couple, who were mending a chicken run, and came across and spoke to them. No suspicion of what he had done lurked in his mind. Like most others of his craft, he took his material where he found it, and believed that, by changing the names and physical attributes of his originals, he had destroyed all recognizable likeness. In any case, it could never occur to him that these humble folk would hear of his book, much less read it. So that his manner was cordial and hearty, and he greeted them with genuine goodwill.

'Well, Kate. Well, John. How are you both? It's good to see you again.'

They answered him courteously, and inquired after his health and that of his wife. Upheld by an ancient pride, not with a tremor of an eyelid did they reveal what was in their hearts. They did not even exchange a word after he had left them, and disappeared up the hill with his companion. What could they do? He was of his world, wealthy, secure. They were poor folk, and could not touch him.

Secretly, too, they were intimidated by his greeting. They had expected him to avoid them, in the knowledge of his treachery. But he did not even seem to be aware that he had done them wrong. The whole thing was inexplicable.

As the days passed, things grew no better. Mary would hardly stir out of doors, and would not see the neighbours. So the tension increased, and the old couple, furtively watching their beloved daughter, grew older visibly in their grief.

Thus the fortnight of Mary's holiday went by, in misery and suspicion, and Kate found herself almost thankful when the last day came.

'Next time it will be better,' said old John, as they trudged back along the little path. 'She will have had time to forget and take it easy.'

Kate said nothing. Next time was a year ahead; and what might not happen in a year?

One evening, ten days later, Kate was up once more upon the hill, getting turf. It had been a rainy day: her

feet slipped and squelched on the black soft ooze, her skirt was heavy with wet from the drenched bracken.

As she came slowly down, bent under her load, her eye caught something white fluttering on the rocks by the point. She stopped, narrowing her eyes against the watery saffron light from the west. It looked as if some one was waving a handkerchief from the rocks just above the water.

Kate grunted, and turned laboriously, looking up at the hill whence she had come, to see a possible object for this greeting. The height stared back at her, naked and washed in the light of the setting sun. She looked down again, and then realized that it was to her the handkerchief was waving. A nuisance. The point lay out of her way. Still, she must go and see what was wanted.

It did not occur to her to wave back. She made her way carefully, slipping once or twice on the slimy surface, and at last stepped out on the smooth sand. Trudging along to the nearest place between the point and her way home, she dropped the sack. Then, shading her eyes with her hand, she looked once more towards the handkerchief.

There was a man lying on a ledge of rock. Seeing her stop and look, he waved again.

Unemotionally, she set off to investigate. As she walked, her eyes, trained by the necessities of a lifetime, looked right and left for anything that might be of use. The sea had been rough, and a thick fringe of weed marked the summit of the last high tide. Kate saw but did not pick up a couple of the glass balls that float the drift nets. Mary used to collect these at one time. There were a score of them scattered about the tiny garden in front of the croft. An empty bottle, a dead gull—there was nothing good on the beach. The best thing she could find was a spar of wood, about three feet long, thick and solid. She picked it up, and brushed some of the sand off against her skirt. It was good wood. Maybe it was too sodden for mending, but it would burn well. Tucking the spar under one arm, she went on towards the point.

She reached the rock, and began methodically to climb. The surface was encrusted with tiny limpets, ragged and

sharp: one needed to go cautiously. As she climbed, she heard the man's voice clearly, calling for help.

She scrambled on, bent double, with a sort of slow agility. The spar was very useful. She was able to lean her hand on it, when the sharp rock would have cut her.

It was six or seven minutes before she reached the ledge. Half a dozen pollack lay on top, recently caught, and a folded mackintosh. Kate looked over the edge, and saw Renton half lying, half sitting on a jagged, irregular shelf of rock, a couple of feet above the water. One leg lay awkwardly, and the torn trouser was soaked with blood. A few yards out, a fishing rod floated in the sea.

Hearing her, the man raised his face. It was pale and bright with sweat. He recognized her, and a pitiful relief gleamed in his eyes.

'Oh, Kate. Thank God you've come. I thought no one would ever see me.'

She stood, looking down at him, expressionless.

'I've made a nice fool of myself,' he said, with an unsteady effort at lightness. 'I've broken my leg, I'm afraid.'

She turned, looked left and right, and began to climb down. With the half-hysterical garrulity of the injured, Renton told her how it had happened.

'I was fishing here, casting for pollack. They were coming in fine. Then, somehow, I slipped on the wet rock. I've been here ages. The tide's coming up fast. I began to get the wind up, I don't mind telling you.'

The old woman squatted, and examined his leg.

'I'm afraid it's broken?' His eyes sought hers, anxious for reassurance.

She stood up. The wet, yellow sunlight illumined the beach and the hill above it. Both were empty. Nothing moved, except a sheep, grazing far up on the side of the hill.

Kate turned and took a step forward. Renton, his face set, was sitting up, attempting with both hands to lever himself into a more comfortable position.

Kate's expression did not change. She uttered an odd laugh.

'Here's something you won't put in a book,' she said.

She tightened her grasp upon the spar, and crashed it

down upon his head with all her force, once, twice, thrice. She stooped, pushed the limp body over into the sea, and threw the spar in after it.

Without looking to see whether he floated or sank, she climbed swiftly up, and made her way back to the sand. When she reached her sack, she once more looked right and left. Beach and hill were empty.

Her face still expressionless, she shouldered the sack, and went home.

XXVII

TINKERS' ROAD

IT'D surprise ye the number of people I've known in me life who've been gathered in to their appropriate reward. It surprises me. I could compile a 'Who's Who' with them—and what a lively pendant it would make to that corpulent and interesting volume! What an odd, mad, jumbled, rag-bag of debits, achievements, and credentials! What unbelievable origins, what astounding progeny, what unprintable recreations! If only I'd the time or energy, I'd set about compiling it at once.

Mind ye, I'm not only speaking of the people I knew well. I'm thinking too of those whose paths would every now and then cross mine: people with elliptical orbits, like those damned things that keep popping in every now and then to say hullo to the Solar System—what d'ye call them?—comets. Thank ye. Ye always have the word. People like comets, who turn up every few years, and you have a word with them, and off they go again; yet somehow, from the few fleeting visits, you get a clear picture, and maybe develop an affection for them, till suddenly the string bursts, and they whizz away into the dark for ever.

About twenty-five years ago, when I first trod the Tinkers' Road, I used often to meet a tall, lithe, swiftly-moving woman of the tinker class. She was invariably dressed in flowing clothes of rusty black, so homogeneous that you'd be hard

put to it to tell whether they were all of one piece or made up of skirt, jacket and shawl. Anyway, the garb was all black, and part of it was used as a head-dress.

The lady was about five foot ten in height, and she wore men's brogues. Her face, though never clean, was strikingly lovely. She had great lustrous black eyes, thick perfect eyebrows, a wealth of black hair, dazzling white wicked-looking teeth, and the reddest lips ever you saw. These lips were usually parted, and her face had an eager, hunting look, as she bent forward, striding through the dusk. I wouldn't be walking the road till I'd left my work, and that was the time I usually saw her.

She looked very different from the usual drunken drab one sees tramping the roads. There was something rather frightening about her, and for some weak reason or other in my character, whenever I met her I'd usually hold out my hand with a few pence, which she would grab without stopping, and with scarce a word of thanks. What used to mystify me was, where the devil she could always be hurrying to? Why the avid and hungry look of the parted lips, why the eagerness of those ever-searching eyes?

Do you know the Tinkers' Road? Well, you're not much the worse off. It's a straight road of three deadly, monotonous miles. There's scarce a house on it, and dull, uninteresting pasture-land lies all the way on either side. All the same, it has splendid hedges, and one can see here and there the remains of a fire, and the discarded rags, tin cans, and fragments of crusts where tinkers have camped and gone their way. Sometimes there'll be a caravan pulled in at the side, but you won't see the owner. He'll be foraging some place, and will only return to sleep in it.

Well, one evening long ago, I was going along this road, and I met the woman I'm telling you about. She was sitting down at the roadside, and her face was whiter than usual. From the look of her, she had been sitting there a long time, and she was in distress. The prudent citizen would most certainly have nothing to do with her, for her appearance, as I've suggested, was the reverse of genial: but on this occasion I halted, observed that it was a lovely evening, and proffered threepence.

My offering was accepted, and before I could start any more conversation, she looked up at me and said wonderingly: 'I'm goin' to get married, begod.'

'Glory be, ma'am,' I said. 'Sure I always thought ye were a married woman. Congratulations anyway. I hope ye've made a good match of it.'

'Yerrah,' she said, 'I dunno, but I'll be glad to change me name anyways.'

'Is that so, ma'am?' says I. 'And may I ask what is your name, and where are ye from? I was often wondering about ye—oh, I don't mean loving ye, ma'am, or anything like that,' I added quickly, as she looked up. 'But ye know, ma'am, ye're a very interesting-looking woman, and I often thought that if ye were dolled up and well looked after, ye'd be a great beauty.'

'Would ye like to smoke, ma'am?' I went on, for she was gazing at me queerly, and I felt embarrassed.

'Thank ye,' says she.

She produced a briar pipe, I filled it for her, and she smoked it just the same as a man would: the same jaw grip, the same keen satisfaction, the same dreamy look in the eyes.

'I'm called Katie the Crane,' she said. 'But be rights me name is Kate Le Crane.'

'That's very interesting, ma'am,' said I. 'Maybe ye're of French or Belgian extraction?'

'Ah, Lord, mister, I don't know; I was born in the Union'—that's the workhouse, you know—'And I've been trampin' the road, beggin', and——'

She stopped and looked at me hard.

'Listen, me sound man,' she said. 'Don't ye know what I am?'

'Sure, ma'am,' said I, 'I never bothered to think what ye were. It's no business of mine.'

'Well,' she said, looking reflectively at the evening sky. 'That's what I am, mister, a tinkers' whore: an' damn' the much I get from it, barring kicks an' blows. So I'm fed up,' she said, 'an' I'm goin' for to get married.'

I asked her what sort the man was, and was he in a good job.

'He's in jail, mister,' she said, 'at the present moment, but sure he'll be out in a few weeks, and then we'll be wed. He's a strong man, and healthy-like.'

She didn't say any more about him, and as it was getting dark, and that's not a road I like in the night-time, I decided to leave. Then a thought struck me, and I produced an English shilling I had about me a long while. It was of the early Victorian period, showing the Queen with her swan-like neck, her crown, and her look of placid virginity.

'Well, ma'am,' said I, 'here's a little wedding present for ye. I only wish it was bigger: and, God knows, I wish ye all the luck in the world. God be good to ye now.'

'Ay,' she shouted after me. 'Come to the weddin', will ye?'

But I pretended not to hear, for I was more than a trifle scared of her. She was so tall and so strong-looking, she put me in mind of Hecate.

After that, I didn't see Katie the Crane for many years. Then one evening, I met her again on the same road. This time she was more pleasant to the eye. The furtive, hungry look had left her. She took the road easy in her stride, and was now accompanied by a glorious-looking young divil of a black-haired, smiling boy. He was arrayed in the most outrageous garments, not one of them fitting him, but he looked the picture of health. There was a real radiance about him, and it was easy to see that Katie the Crane took great pleasure in him.

I stopped them, and gave the usual donation, but to my disappointment I found that she didn't remember me from Adam. As it happened, we were almost in the exact spot where I had spoken to her last, when she had told me about her impending marriage.

I reminded her, and her face lit up. She recalled the incident, but not me as a person.

Then suddenly: 'Wait a minute, mister,' she said, and began to fumble at her throat. The boy stared, and all of a sudden she pulled up what I thought was a medal tied on the end of a dirty bit of string.

'Look at that now,' she cried. 'There's your lucky shilling.'

And so it was.

'Did you marry the man?' I asked her.

'Bedad, I did,' she replied. 'And he's with me yet. He had luck after coming out of jail, and wasn't in it but the one time since. Now he's a militiaman, and busy at the autumn exercises. I do get a few shillings each week from the Army,' she said, 'but I beg a little still for me and the child's food.' The ghost of a smile came over her face. 'I've given up the other thing, mister,' she added.

'Well, ma'am,' I answered, 'I'm glad to hear that.'

'Ah, yes,' she said. 'It's too uncomfortable.'

I pointed to the boy.

'What's his name?' I asked.

'Kinahan.'

'That's a queer name,' said I. 'Why do you call him that?'

She smiled equably. 'It's his name, mister,' she said.

I put my hand in my pocket and found a few more coppers for Mr. Kinahan. He smiled at me ravishingly, and at once gave them to his mother.

'Buy something for him, ma'am,' I said to her. 'He's the dead spit of your handsome self.'

'I will, sir,' she said, and so we parted.

Then the war of 1914 started, and I never saw her again till somewhere near the year 1930. I met a man down town one night, and, after one word borrowing another, says he to me: 'There's an old friend of yours over in St. James's there. What price the two of us going over to pay her a visit?'

'Who is it?' I asked—for St. James's is our hospital, and I knew no one there.

'Ah, come on,' said my friend. 'Ye'll know her well enough when ye see her.'

So in we went, up the clean icy stairs, along the barren, ether-smelling corridors, past walls adorned here and there with holy pictures, alternating with the silly, blank-looking busts of dead and forgotten Doctors and Donors, till at last we came to St. Kevin's Ward.

There was a bright fire burning, and it was appallingly

clean and tidy, as only a hospital ward can be. And over, sitting up in bed, was an old lady.

There was something familiar about her, but before I had made up my mind, my friend—he's a marine engineer, and wielding a very bright shovel in the stole-hole of one of the mailboats, and is usually in a semi-Bacchic state—my friend shouted out: 'Looka, Katie, I've brought an old friend to see ye.'

And bedad, it was Katie the Crane—but oh how changed. How tame. How clean. How different.

Her hands were snow-white, her nails were trimmed, her hair dressed. She had on the daintiest-looking nightie, and over her shoulders was draped a handsome shawl with a fringe. Beside the bed was wine, biscuits, cigarettes, fruit, glasses, but divil a book or a paper.

Katie remembered me this time—and do you know, she had the damned shilling still.

'Mick,' said she to my friend, 'ye're the best man on God's earth, but I don't want ye now. The gentleman here and meself has something private to talk over.'

'Oho,' says Mick, with a wink like pulling down a blind. 'Oho,' says he.

He went away then, winking and grinning, and I heard him bump into one of the nurses in the door and apologize to her.

There was a queer silence, with Katie and me looking one at the other, and she smiling.

'You've nothing to read here,' I said. 'Will I bring you a book or a magazine?'

'Ah,' said she, 'what would be the use of that, mister? Sure I never learned to read or write.'

We had a long talk then, and she told me that her husband and Kinahan had gone to fight for King and country, and that they both were blown to hell at Vimy Ridge.

'The last time they were back on leave,' she said, 'they got drunk in York Street, and one or the other of them kicked me in the belly and called me a whore. I never was out of the bed since,' she said, and smiled.

'That was a great misfortune for ye, ma'am,' I said.

'Ah, not at all,' she answered. 'Sure, I was never so happy

nor so comfortable before. I have a widow's pension of near two pound a week; more bloody money than I ever saw in me life.'

Then we fell silent. There didn't seem much to say. I promised to come and see her again, and I did so a few more times. She was not in any way entertaining as company, but you felt drawn to her somehow. She was a lovely, handsome animal, vital, queer, and miles away from the feelings and passions that civilized people have. She was in no way aggrieved about her life, and had no regrets about anything. The efforts of the nuns to make a Christian out of her were hopeless, for she never could understand in the faintest degree what they were talking about, though she did her best to oblige them.

The last visit I paid her—she had been years in bed by then—we spoke of Kinahan in the old days, when she was young.

Her face softened, and for a moment she looked as she did when I met her with him on the Tinkers' Road.

'Begod, sir,' she said, 'I was goin' for to make a real gentleman out of him. A clerk, or some soft thing like that. But maybe he's better off the way he is.'

'I'm sure of it, ma'am,' I said.

XXVIII

LOVE

LOVE? Ah, don't talk to me about love. Sure, I'll never be cured.

Will you look at me. Fifty-nine years and five months, a respectable married man, fourteen stone ten, and two grandchildren—and as liable to slide bang into love at first sight as if I'd put one heel on a banana and the other on a slug. *And* I wouldn't have it different. The day I see a beautiful woman or a pretty girl without a flutter and a bang under the left-hand pockets of me waistcoat, you may hang me

up in the porch like a strap of seaweed to tell you when it's going to rain; for I'll be no more use to man or beast, and, judging by me general powers of prediction, very little use even for that.

Love! Why, it happened to me only the other day. All over again, for the first time in the world—or was it the one hundred and first? It's no matter. There's no time in love.

I was at a circus with me wife, and there was the loveliest girl in the world, sellin' programmes. I couldn't take me eyes off her. There I sat, gawking at her, looking lumps of love, and trying to hide it from me wife, for she doesn't always appreciate it if I admire beauty outside the home.

We sat there, I looking at me lovely girl, ready to buy all her programmes off her one at a time, when me wife turns to me.

'Have ye no shame!' says she, 'and your heart shakin' the seats we're sittin' on.'

'Flatulency, ma'am,' says I. 'Flatulency, and damn the ha'porth else.'

Ah, but sure, that was only the last time. One of dozens. One of scores. One of hundreds. Last summer, I was walking along in a village—oh no, I'm not going to tell you the name, for, though I'm not jealous and I've no designs, I don't want any of you spry young divils walking around exploring.

I got to the end of the lane. There were three shops, little fusty ones, all in a cluster, and after them two or three private houses of the kind small tradesmen build when they are prosperous enough to sleep out of Dublin. All I could see of the village, besides the shops and the houses, was a spire and the back of a queer black church.

Out of the first of these three little shops came a noise. I ought to have been warned, but I wasn't. I looked in at the window, and saw that the shop dealt in twine, rope, wireless, somebody's toffee, Seidlitz powders, a card of penny bottles of castor oil, mineral waters, laces, pencils with rubbers on the end, bicycle lamps, bicycle fittings in general, newspapers, a cooked ham on a plate of unnatural whiteness,

four score wasps, and, nearly on top of the ham, the fattest and cleanest looking of big tom-cats, dead asleep.

I began making amorous noises to shake up the cat, and he opened one languid lozenge of an eye at me. Stepping round to establish an entente with him, I became aware that I was being watched, looked up, and saw—leaning there in the doorway—Circe, Madame Pompadour, Cleopatra, Nell Gwynne, Psyche, all that was most maddenngly desirable in womankind on a sunny spring morning, gazing at me with a smile of unfeigned amusement.

Now I am remarkable not only in the facility with which I fall in love, but in the speed. I am normally able to fall in love in three-eighths of a second. This time I did it in one-eighth; and that despite of obstacles. Normally I don't react to golden hair. This girl's was like a cornfield in the sun. A clean, fresh apron is poison to me. She had a clean, fresh apron on; and I crashed head, neck, and heels in love with her—and in one-eighth of a second, instead of me normal untrammelled three.

She had a neck she could speak with, and it functioned like a swan's.

She had a small oval face, and nordic, first-communion blue eyes.

Her teeth were a marvel, her ankles were pure bait—and, I'm telling you, I foresaw black ruin.

In a flash, and no one can think ahead quicker than I, I saw black ruin: wife and children forgotten, grandchildren dismissed to blazes, home broken up, job gone, and heaven knows what in front—and at the same instant, with an intensity of speed not to be described, I saw meself young (mind you, I've never yet thought I was old), swinging hands with her and walking along an endless springtime road in the sunshine.

Anyway, there I stood, I, of the weight and age and circumstances already stated, in raptures with her face, her eyes, her hair, mad in love with her, and all inside a second.

Being a woman, of course, she saw all this: and I, being smart enough in me way, I saw that she saw it. It didn't make me feel too dignified, so I went up to her and asked—oh Lord of Romance!—could I buy some bicycle oil?

She nodded, and I saw us both living in one room at

Palermo on a pound a week. I followed her into the shop. There the noise I had first heard became terribly deep and menacing. I realized then what it was—the warning of me guardian angel, the frantic whirring of the alarm clock of destiny, adjuring me for all it was fit and saying: ‘Run, you old sinner, run! Destruction’s on!’

She put a can into me hand, and I let it drop. She picked it up and gave it to me again, and I put it down beside the ham. She rescued it, and, still mesmerizing me, handed it to me once again, when I tried to put it into me left-hand top waistcoat pocket to keep me heart in place.

If she hadn’t kept looking at me with those blue Boccaccio eyes, I might have been saved; but, as it was, I was struck cataleptic, and me heart banging against the tin like a potato in a kettle. I fumbled for money, and felt the waters closing over me as I touched her hand. I was helpless with love in that emporium of dreams. I was sick with I don’t know what early summer passion in that one-horse store, and any sense I ever had was outside somewhere, winging its way like a duck over land and sea, home to Killiney to warn Mrs. M. what was happening and tell her to be up and doing if ever she wanted to see her man again. It was terrible. It lasted ages.

After twenty years, I asked her what the blazes was that noise, and she told me it was batteries she was filling, but I knew better. It was not only the wheels of me own destiny, it was men’s hearts frying, somewhere in the back kitchen.

Another long period passed, and I, an octogenarian by now but feeling mighty spry, said it was a glorious morning, and Lord deliver us, she smiled! She knew.

After another year (I had her hand in mine all these years, giving her the money for the oil) I said it looked as if it was going to keep up, and she smiled again.

That did it. Any self-restraint I ever had blew away. I told her she was a breathing miracle. I said I’d travelled the world, and seen glorious-looking women in me time, but bedad . . . ! I said she must be keeping the shop for a joke, hiding away so the king wouldn’t find her too soon, and she threw back her head and laughed, showing an expanse of neck that made me yell for the fire brigade.

She asked me where I came from, and I said that I had started from Arcady when I was seventeen and grown old and fat and wheezy searching the world for her.

'What are you going to do now?' said she.

'I'm going to kiss you,' I said, 'or die in the attempt.'

She pointed out to me in the most indescribably sweet and inviting manner that such a thing would be madness, but I had a dart at it, and was getting along gloriously, when somewhere (as John McCormack used to tell us) a voice was calling; not one, but two, good and strong, mixed up with the wheels of destiny and the sizzling hearts and the machinery that was filling the battery. I made one dive, I achieved one ecstatic kiss, which lasted a few seconds under four hours, and then she skilfully side-stepped me.

I awoke, and there she stood, holding two babes in her ample arms.

'What have you to say to that?' she laughed.

'Begob, ma'am,' I stuttered, 'if I stop here much longer—'

She sat down on a heap of tyres, with her fat babies, and I sat down right beside her, and we laughed and laughed and laughed, and the batteries—they sounded more like batteries now—kept buzzing away.

Then all of a sudden a man in blue overalls came in. He had a moustache like a bottle-brush, and a wad of waste in his hand. She got up, and I got up, and we exchanged a few amiable commonplaces, and next minute I was outside. Four miles on the far side of the village I remembered the can of oil and me change. I had neither. But begob, if it had been the change for a pound itself, I'd have left it there.

No. These things are too disturbing when you get to be my age. But won't it be awful when I'm not able to be disturbed any more? Do you know, I have a suspicion, a very shrewd suspicion, that that won't be till I'm in me grave?

XXIX

EVENING PIECE

'OOO-EE-EE.' With a queer little whining noise the old man straightened his back. He leaned on the handle of his three-pronged fork, peered into the can, and decided he had dug enough lug-worms for the next day. His dog, Mick, who had been watching him with a resigned boredom, sprang to his feet, wagged his tail, and let a bark.

'Hold your noise, now,' the old man admonished him, and went stiffly to the dry rock where he had left his belongings. The tide had turned, and a chill evening breeze was coming in with it from the bay. The old man shivered, and swore to himself: but he did not let the breeze hurry his ritual.

First, he cleaned the fork on the loose tresses of seaweed hanging from the rock. Then he washed his hands in a pool, and dried them on an old rag, before putting on his coat. Last, he picked up his false teeth, which lay grinning on a pinnacle of the rock. A new set, they did not fit too well, and, when he stooped to dig, they were apt to fall out. He washed them carefully in a second pool, put them in his mouth, and chumbled with satisfaction at the harsh, clean taste of the salt water. Then he picked up fork and can, and shuffled up to the sea wall, where he had left his bicycle. With another short, single bark, Mick ran ahead.

When he reached the wall, the old man realized that it was later than he had supposed. Darkness was coming up fast. The lights along the pier were winking, and the spires of Dun Laoghaire were vanishing into a murk of cloud. The old man strapped the fork to the bar of his bicycle, prongs foremost, hung his bait-can over the handlebars, and slowly, with a series of stiff hops, mounted from the step behind. The bicycle was low geared, and his legs pedalled surprisingly fast, with a wide, capering motion, for the sedate pace at which he progressed.

He was making his way along, keeping close to the kerb, his mind pleasantly concerned with thoughts of supper, when

a deep voice broke in upon him, nearly making him fall off in surprise.

‘Stop!’

The old man pulled up, to see a large form looming up out of the dusk, holding up a white-gloved hand.

‘Stop, you. Where’s your lamp?’

The old man stared at his handlebars in feigned astonishment.

‘Well—I declare to me God!—Sergeant—would ye believe it? If that isn’t the second time in a fortnit either I lost the lamp or it’s been stolen on me. Isn’t that the devil? I swear it was lighting just now, and I down at the Pier looking at them French sailors. Did you see them, Sergeant? A fine body o’ men. Oh, bedad they are. A fine body o’ men.’

The sergeant looked at the fork and the can of bait, his big chin deep on his chest.

‘Tell me,’ he said at last, ‘and what age might you be?’

‘Well, Sergeant. I’m nearer eighty than you are.’

‘Be God, then, you’re a fine man. But, for your age, you’re a foolish man. All velocipedes must have a lamp, and a lighting lamp. Don’t ye know that?’

‘Sure I know it well, Sergeant; and I observe it too. I’m the carefulest man in Ireland on a bike. Sure I couldn’t cycle five paces without a lamp.’

‘Where do ye live?’ asked the sergeant.

‘Above in Delgany Villas. Number seventy-one.’

‘Number seventy-one, is it? Isn’t that a queer thing. That’s my own number; Seventy-one B.’

The Sergeant showed the metal figures on his uniform.

‘So it is, Sergeant. So it is. Well now. Isn’t that a coin-*ci*-dence.’

‘Aye. Seventy-one B. I suppose there wouldn’t be a B in yours too?’

‘No, Sergeant. Only the plain seventy-one. There’s one house, farther down the street, a largish size of a house, has an A in it. Nineteen, I think it is. Nineteen, and nineteen A. But I never heard there to be one with a B. And mine isn’t either A or B; only the plain seventy-one.’

All the time he was speaking, the old man’s eye kept

glancing nervously towards the dog. Mick knew he was in a jam, and was only waiting for the shred of an excuse, a note in the voice, the flicker of his master's eyelid even, to be at the sergeant and bury his teeth in him. He kept circling round the big blue-clad legs, his back straight, his whole body non-committal and cleared for action.

Even as his master finished speaking, Mick sensed fear, and edged in closer. The old man's blood chilled in him. He had had no licence for a dog this twenty years. His mind leaped ahead in anguish and saw disaster. No lamp—no licence—keeping a ferocious dog—constable's right thumb bitten off—faith, the best he could hope for was eleven years' hard.

As if reading his thoughts, the sergeant glanced downwards. 'Ay,' said he. 'Will ye call this animal off, away from me legs.'

'Come here, Mick, come here this minyit. Have ye no sense?'

The old man's voice rose fiercely to a squeak. Hesitating for a second, the dog came reluctantly to the back wheel of the bicycle. From that distance he growled softly.

The sergeant looked at him with disfavour. 'Faith, that's a queer cull-de-sack of an animal. What do ye call him?'

'Mick, Sergeant.'

'No, ye gomm. What breed is he?'

'Well, bedad, ye puzzle me there, Sergeant. I don't rightly know his pedigree.'

'I believe ye,' said the sergeant, still looking at Mick. 'Well—tell me—where are ye proceedin' to now?'

'I'm goin' home to me supper, Sergeant.' The old man's face creased artfully, ingratiatingly. 'I'm that careful about bicycles—indeed I am, Sergeant. I do be constantly preaching to them at home about the lamps on bicycles. It's funny I should be the first one to fall meself this way, but, as you know, Sergeant—'

The sergeant interrupted him with feigned ferocity. 'Listen here to me, me sound man. Will ye for Jasus' sake trundle that velocipede through the town and take yourself and that animal to hell out o' this. And go by the back road. Be

the holies, I'm surprised at ye, a man of your age. It's in your bed ye should be.'

'Indeed, you're right, Sergeant. You're right. Ah, isn't old age a caution. I do dread it comin' on me.'

'Well. Be off with ye now.'

'I will, Sergeant, I will. Thank you kindly. You'll not be troubled again.'

'Ay,' the sergeant called after him. 'Get a chain, and chain the lamp on your velocipede. And chain that dog o' yours to it, too.'

'I will, Sergeant. I will.'

The old man pushed his bike along till he reached the back road. Then, with a sly look up and down, he mounted it again, hop-hop-hop, and, after a preliminary wobble or two, went off at his queer, high-stepping amble into the darkness.

XXX

ON THE PIER

IT was a warm, fine evening in August. The band had just finished the third item on its programme, and Mr. Luke Mangan was strolling up and down the East Pier at Dun Laoghaire, looking for a seat. People tend to walk about during the intervals, and, though there were plenty of deck-chairs to be had for twopence a time, Mr. Mangan was looking for a free seat. He was not a mean man with his money, but had an objection to spending anything unnecessary upon himself.

Then, by good fortune, he came upon a small bench which had just been vacated, and sat down. He stroked his moustache, pulled out his pipe, lit it, and looked about him. The mail-boat was getting ready for departure, and, as Mr. Mangan watched, the train from Dublin came puffing in, looking small and amateurish on the jetty.

Mr. Mangan's eye roved further, and came to rest upon a

couple of shabbily dressed persons standing by one of the stone posts, and quarrelling bitterly in subdued tones. He decided that they were married, and that the man had lost money backing horses. No definite process of reasoning led him to this conclusion, except that the man had the look of those shabby optimists who hang around outside betting shops, waiting for the result of the 2.30, and then shamble off in dismay for further attempts at prophecy.

So deep was he in contemplation of this couple, and of the thoughts they provoked, that Mr. Mangan almost jumped when some one sat down beside him on the bench. Turning his head and looking sideways under his baggy eyelids, he beheld a little old lady who might have been wafted there from the pages of *Nicholas Nickleby*.

She wore mittens adorned with nondescript beaded stuff at the wrists. She held a tall black umbrella with a swan's-head handle—although it had not rained for a fortnight, and showed no sign of raining. She wore boots with elastic sides, twin pair, Mr. Mangan decided, to the pair Dan Leno wore in his last impersonation of the Widow Twankey. Her stockings had alternate black and white circular stripes, for all the world like sugar-sticks. She wore steel-rimmed glasses, none too bright, with a crack across the corner of the eye nearest Mr. Mangan. Her black dress was what he mentally called a dim, fluttery, rusty sort of a black dress, and it was topped off by a dolman with worn braid. On her head was perched a toque—an authentic, old-fashioned sort of a toque, not the modern article of the same name—with a bird's wing indecisively applied to it, neither on the one side nor the other.

The old lady had faded china-blue eyes, a touch of colour in her cheeks, and a tendency to nasal catarrh; and her head trembled slightly, as did her hands.

While Mr. Mangan was wondering how best to begin, the band started on Grieg's *Peer Gynt* Suite. The old lady moved her head, and Mr. Mangan caught her eye.

He raised his hat, coughed formally, bowed, and asked her, did she mind him smoking?

The old lady fluttered, tittered, and pulled herself together.

'Indeed, sir, I love to see gentlemen smoking. My dear

brother . . . the Zulu War, you know . . . it is a long time ago now, a long time. He used to smoke.'

Mr. Mangan uttered a friendly murmur. The little old lady lifted herself and came closer to him, settling down like a bird giving itself a bath.

'Dear George, he was so good a brother . . . so kind, so loyal, so considerate . . . that music reminds me. He introduced Mr. James to me.'

'Yes, ma'am?'

She sniffed, and looked unseeingly across at the mail-boat.

'Yes, indeed. Mr. James knew a great deal about music. He used to bring me about a lot, to concerts. He adored Grieg, Wagner, Beethoven. . . . Oh dear me! But I am tiring you, sir.'

'Not at all, ma'am, not at all. I am deeply interested.'

'It is kind of you to say so, sir.' She sniffed again, and dabbed her thin nose with a handkerchief. 'Let me see, where was I?'

In the middle of the last century, thought Mr. Mangan. He said aloud: 'You were speaking about Mr. James and the concerts he used to bring you to, ma'am.'

She looked around, as if to see that no one was listening, and settled herself even closer. Her next words were a surprise even to Mr. Mangan.

'He wooed me,' she said, and was silent.

'Yes, ma'am?' said Mr. Mangan, hardly above a whisper. 'And what then?'

'Yes. Pray pardon me. It was in eighteen-eighty . . . something . . . I have such a poor head for dates now, and for figures, and for names. . . . I'm not as young as I was. My memory, you know.'

'Ah, ma'am, that's the way with all of us. But there are some things we remember.'

She took him up eagerly. 'Yes, yes. Mr. James was so ardent. He was connected with the music publishing business, and he sold sherry on commission. My Mama and Papa quite approved. I loved Mr. James dearly. He was so tall, so handsome, and he had such distinguished manners.'

She broke off, and peered wistfully at an errant terrier nosing around their feet.

'Enormously rich, they said. He used to drive to our house in a cab. But Elizabeth I can never, never forgive. No, I am not uncharitable, sir; but I can never really forgive her.'

'Indeed, yes, ma'am. In spite of all our Christianity, there are some things hard to forgive.'

'Yes, sir. Yes, sir.'

Her face was averted now, and Mr. Mangan leaned forward in an effort to see it.

'What did she do?' he asked.

She compressed her thin lips, and there was something almost like determination in the poise of her head. Her voice changed.

'Ah, my good man, it was long, long before your time. We wore bustles then. Let me see . . . eighteen-eighty something . . . '—she clicked her tongue—'I have no head for figures whatever now.

'Well, we were to be married, sir, at the Mariners' Church'—she pointed towards the spire—'and my bridesmaid was this Elizabeth I am telling you of. God forgive her. I heard she died abroad, of the drink, they said, but that I will never believe, no, never. False she may have been, but a better-living girl never drew breath.

'Where was I? Oh, yes, the Mariners' Church. How lovely the spire looks against the sun. Don't you think so, sir? Why, yes, certainly, smoke away, I love the smell of tobacco. My Uncle Geoffrey always smoked navy cut.

'Well, poor Elizabeth was to be my bridesmaid, and the wedding, you see . . . *my* wedding . . . was to be at eight o'clock in the morning. We were earlier people then, you know. Eight o'clock at the Mariners' Church; it was all arranged. And Mr. James . . . '

Her voice tailed off, and for about a minute she did not say any more. Mr. Mangan knew better than to prompt her now.

'Yes. Elizabeth slept with me the night before the wedding. It was the custom then. The bridesmaid always slept with the bride. Mr. James had a deep regard for her, they were quite a lot together. How blind I was! But when one is nineteen and in love . . . Are you married, sir?'

'Lord, yes, ma'am! I'm a granddaddy.' .

'Ah, well, you'll understand these things much better, I dare say, than I.'

'Well, ma'am, and what happened then?'

'Yes, pray pardon me. She slept with me in Clarinda Park. Those houses were new then, and most fashionable. They are let out in flats now, quite different, I believe. My bedroom was at the very top of the house. Mr. James was staying at the hotel . . . you know . . . we were to have the wedding breakfast there . . . and then to go away on the mail-boat. Paddle-boats they were then. It's very odd, sir, but I have never been on any sort of boat in all my life. Never, never across the sea. Ah, the *Dance of the Gnomes*—isn't that what they're playing?'

Oho, thought Mr. Mangan. It's by dint of Grieg we're getting all this. Aloud he said: 'That's right, ma'am. But what happened?'

The old lady shrank into herself. The mail-boat let its last despairing sound, the deep note clashing strangely with the band. Another two minutes, and the boat would start.

The sound made the old lady jump. Suddenly she braced herself, if anything so fragile could be braced. She clasped and unclasped her thin fingers, and began to tremble.

'Elizabeth kissed me, and we abed together. In those days the bridesmaid always slept with the bride-to-be: I don't know what the custom is now. I don't know what people do now. She put her arms round me in the dark and whispered: "Do you love him very dearly?" . . .

'When I woke up it was after eight, and I was alone in the bed. From that day to this I have never heard one word of them . . . except that rumour of Elizabeth's death, which I think I mentioned to you.

'I dressed anyhow. I ran to the church. They knew nothing . . . about me . . . about any wedding arrangements for me. In short, sir, Mr. James had wed Elizabeth, and they ran away. A false friend, she was . . . deceit . . .'

She began to tremble very much, to fidget and snatch at her handkerchief.

'I must go. I am not quite myself. The sea air, I suppose. You are so sympathetic, sir, so kind.'

'Let me bring you to the tram, or the bus, at all events, ma'am.'

She rose and took his arm, and fluttered along beside him, dabbing every now and then at her eyes and nose. The people on the seats and the passers-by stared at the strange couple. Mr. Mangan, acutely conscious, realized the interpretations they must be making, the speculations, the guesses—just as he himself would speculate about such a couple if he saw them.

He brought her, trembling, a queer little old person—like the end page of a torn novelette, he thought, which you'd see blowing about in a park—he brought her to the city bus, and put her aboard, with ceremonious farewells, and tittering protestations of thanks from her.

The conductor, a young smart-Alec of a chap, cocked his head and eyed Mr. Mangan. Mr. Mangan put his hand in his pocket and gave him a shilling.

'You see that old one there,' he said. 'She's my aunt. Look after her like a decent man, will you?'

The conductor nodded. 'O-kay,' he said.

Mr. Mangan went round to the front of the bus, to raise his hat and wave to the old lady as it slithered away, but she was still busy with her handkerchief, and had forgotten him. He turned, and saw the mailboat, its lights gleaming, gracefully rounding the elbow of the pier. The lights dazzled in his eyes. He blew his nose, glared fiercely at a small boy who was regarding him, and began to walk meditatively homewards, looking at the ground.

XXXI

SUN ON THE WATER

LEANING forward on his stick, the invalid shuffled eagerly down the road to the little harbour. A thin white dust rose from his feet. When he reached the pier, the glare of the sun from the uneven stones hit him like a blow, and made

him shut his eyes. He staggered, and almost fell. Breathless, he supported himself on his stick, and stood swaying, waiting for his sister to catch up with him. But she, coming along with his cushions, rug, and parasol, had stopped for a moment to speak to a little girl by the boat-house.

Finding himself steadier, the invalid cautiously opened his eyes. By keeping them screwed up, he was able to peer around upon the scene. First he looked anxiously for the place where he liked best to sit. It was empty. He gave a little gasp of satisfaction; and immediately, lest even now some one should approach and heap it full of lobster pots or other gear, he pulled himself together, and shambled forward.

Arrived, staking out his claim, and standing on the chosen stone, he turned, and waved his stick impatiently at his sister.

She nodded back, but stopped to finish what she was saying, and did not hurry herself. The invalid began to be indignant. She was very casual. Unimaginative. She ought to understand by now how tired it made him to walk down. She ought to know better than keep him waiting. Half the time, she would walk on ahead, stopping with ill-concealed impatience to wait for him. Especially if there were people looking. Just as if he were walking slowly on purpose. Then as likely as not she would dawdle behind, and keep him waiting.

For a few seconds it seemed that he was going to work himself into 'a state', as she would have called it. Then the beauty of the day, the thought of the delights ahead of him, and the realization that everything was just as he wanted, drove resentment out of his mind. When his sister came up, he beamed at her with nervous satisfaction.

'Here,' he said, 'please. Here. On this stone. No, no. I like that one on top. Yes, the leather one. And the other cushion there. Thank you. Just like that. Thanks.'

Indulgently, with the carelessness of one to whom a person's illness is no longer a novelty, the girl arranged the cushions, and then, catching the invalid by his elbow, lowered him gently to them.

'Now,' he said again, breathless, 'the parasol.'

She set it in place for him every day, but, even so, he felt that she was careless about him, that he could not trust her. She was capable of seeing something which interested her, and strolling over to investigate, leaving him half a minute, or a minute maybe, unprotected. And she, responding to the irritation, felt in her turn an irrational compulsion to delay, to shade her eyes and look across to the mainland, to see if the boat was in sight yet, before she finished making him comfortable for his vigil.

II

The place the invalid had chosen had every advantage. The pier extended a narrow rocky promontory. It was perhaps a dozen yards in width and fifty long. For most of its length it ran level, though the stones, large, almost uncut, were very uneven. At the end, it sloped down steeply in a concrete slip, which was smooth enough for boats to be dragged up and down, and long enough to allow of landing at low tide. All along the top, on the inland side, ran a low wall of uncut stones, about three feet high. The invalid's pitch was ideal, because at that place the wall sloped so as to give him a comfortable back to lean against, while on top there was a convenient little fissure in which he could fix the handle of the parasol, and keep the sun from his head and the back of his neck. Moreover, the stone on which he sat sloped comfortably also, and had little irregularities in which he could rest his heels when he grew stiff and tired of one position.

He had been sent to the island for the sun and pure Atlantic air. With his sister to look after him, he lived in a little house close above the harbour. The mornings he had perforce to spend in the garden. It had been pleasant enough at first, but as the weeks went by the invalid began to get restless and crave for life and movement. From the garden he could see nothing, and was, moreover, tantalized by the sounds of people passing in the road outside.

Passionately he petitioned the island doctor to let him go farther afield. The doctor, an old man living practically in retirement, had been half stimulated, half perturbed, by the

arrival of so spectacular a patient. Wishing above all things to be on the safe side, he would not at first hear of the invalid's project. But the invalid pleaded so hard, and grew so frantic with boredom, at last beginning to run a temperature again, that he gave in, and grudgingly allowed him to go as far as the harbour—'though it is at your own risk, mind ye, Mr. Morison. I cannot be held responsible for any adverse consequences that may ensue.'

No adverse consequences ensued. On the contrary, his patient justified the step by a marked improvement. So, although still shaking his head, and reserving the right of proving correct after all, the old man protested no further.

At a quarter past one, therefore, as soon as the ritual necessitated by his ailment was over, the invalid, trembling with impatience, would make his way down to the harbour, that focus of the island's life, and sit there till evening, watching all that happened.

His sister stretched, and yawned. Her strong arms were covered with fine, fair hair.

'I'll be back with your tea.'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Sure you've all you want?'

'Yes, thank you. Yes. Yes.'

Now that he was safely ensconced, the invalid was anxious to be rid of her. He wanted to savour all the joys in front of him, to hug himself in his secret satisfaction, to contemplate and squeeze the full value out of all that happened.

He knew the island life now by heart. Tuesday was a good day. In fact, it was the best. So much to watch, and a day and a background of perfect beauty on which to watch it! The only drawback was that there was a soft, fine-weather haze to seaward. The mainland, though only twelve miles away, was barely visible. It appeared as a dim, beautiful dream of a mountain here, and there, low down upon the water level, so faint that one kept losing it, a soft, milky patch of white sand.

To the invalid's right, the arm of the natural harbour, made of sharp rocks and grass of a still dazzling green, abruptly cut off the seaward view. Inland, low-lying weedy rocks sloped up to grassy hummocks, and hummocks to narrow fields.

Above the fields stretched an irregular belt of woods, breaking off sharply at the edge of a moor. Fields and woods extended for perhaps a mile, northward from the little harbour. Beyond them, the coast rose steeply, became precipitous, and receded in a line of rocky cliffs.

All this part of the island, above the woods, and right along as far as the eye could see, was a wild table-land. Over the harbour, it drooped in a graceful curve, then shot up swiftly into the island's most striking feature, the Sguir, a great jagged rock, flung proudly a thousand feet into the sky, and so overshadowing village and harbour that one was conscious of it even when looking out to sea.

III

The first event upon the afternoon's programme was the arrival of the bi-weekly boat from the mainland. She was due soon after two, but was not yet visible owing to the haze. A new boat, handsome, with short red funnels, white paintwork, and high black hull, she drew too much water for the little harbour. Instead of coming up to the slip, as the old boat had done, she must heave to outside, while Sandy Blake's motor-boat put out and drew alongside, to take off passengers, parcels and mails.

A great deal of talk the new boat had occasioned, when the company put her on last summer. The islanders were shocked by the fact that she could not come into the harbour. On the other hand, they had reluctantly to admit that she was seaworthy. The old boat often could not face the crossing in bad weather. One winter, the island had been for three weeks without mails. The new boat, however, with her greater size and her powerful Diesel engines, could make way against the heaviest storm, and under the semi-shelter of the headland Sandy's boat could always get to her.

So the islanders sighed, and accepted the inevitable. Sandy was pleased, for he got a good contract; and by this summer the people were learning to be proud of the fine new boat, which was bringing them more visitors and promised to open up the island to a profitable tourist traffic.

It was soon evident, however, that an unexpected event

was to come first. Already some of the island folk had begun to drift down towards the harbour, to meet the steamer. Hearing an exclamation from one of them, the invalid looked out and saw a white motor-boat rounding the headland. Blinking at it in the dazzle, he recognized it almost as soon as did the islanders. It came over fairly often from the mainland, chartered by visitors who wanted to see the island and the famous caves, or maybe, if energetic, to climb the Sguir and obtain a view unmatched in the West.

Yes, the boat was clearly bringing visitors. Their gay colours could be seen already, and their voices, happily exclaiming, rose above the noise of the engine. They began collecting baskets. One of the men, tall, slim, wearing only a shirt and shorts, ran nimbly along the broad gunwale. The others laughingly remonstrated, and Andrew the engineer blinked up protestingly from under his eyeshade.

Yes, such active visitors would surely wish to climb the Sguir; and so firmly had the invalid identified himself with the island, that he looked up at the stark rock apprehensively, because the haze would spoil their view, and they might therefore think less of what they had come to see.

In a couple of minutes the boat was alongside. Andrew the engineer stayed by the engine, while an older, bearded man, whom the invalid did not recognize, shuffled ape-like forward and clawed at the shore with a boat-hook. Barely waiting for him, the tall man sprang on shore, and proceeded to hand out the girls of the party. There were three men and three girls—all under thirty, the invalid decided, staring with frank curiosity at their healthy, sun-burned faces.

Besides the tall man, there was another with fair hair, broader of build, not so tall, and maybe a couple of years older. The third was lightly built, and very dark. Of the girls, two were dark, one with a colouring almost Italian, which she intensified by the bright colours she wore: and the last was fair, graceful, and tall: though as became apparent when he handed her ashore, not nearly so tall as the tallest of the men.

IV

Once ashore, the girls clamoured, stretching down their hands for the baskets. The old man, hanging on tight to the boat-hook, intervened.

'No,' he said. 'Too heavy. Get ashore, please,' he went on, turning his head to the two men still in the boat. 'Get ashore, and I am handing out the baskets.'

'We've got to do what we're told,' laughed the dark man. He sprang out, and the invalid saw that his hairy legs were cruelly sunburned. Light though it was, his leap rocked the boat, and the old man grunted. The third man followed, and the old man slowly handed up the baskets.

'Where shall we put these?'

'Well—where do you want to have lunch?'

'I'm damned if I carry these things far.'

'What about here?' The fair girl pointed to the wall, not far from the invalid. 'What's wrong with that?'

'What, right down here in the harbour?'

'Well, why not? We'll give you plenty of exploring afterwards, Derek: don't you worry.'

'It smells of tar.'

'And very healthy too.'

Decisively, the speaker walked across, and deposited his basket against the wall.

'Right you are.'

They all moved across, and began unpacking the baskets.

'Damned hard, these stones.'

'Get the cushions out of the boat, then.'

'You *are* fussy, John.'

'Fussy, hell. I don't want to get—'

'Ssh!'

With a laugh, the tall man slouched over for the cushions. A couple of seconds later, a cry came from one of the girls.

'I say! She's forgotten the chocolate.'

'What?'

'No, I mean to say, damn it all, that's serious.'

'I can't enjoy my lunch without chocolate.'

'Let's go and get some. There's sure to be a shop here, or something. Look. Up there. It isn't far.'

The tall man turned directly to the invalid, causing him almost to faint with pleasure.

'I say, could you tell us—Is there a village shop, or somewhere where we can get some chocolate?'

Suffused with excitement, the invalid was for a second unable to speak. He nodded eagerly, and pointed.

'Up there,' he got out. 'It's no distance. Hanbury's. They sell quite good chocolate. It comes over from the mainland fresh each week.'

The man smiled.

'Thanks,' he said. Then, 'Who'll go?'

'I will.'

'I will.'

'Let's all go.'

'Yes. Hector'll look after our things': and then, with a smile, the girl apologized, as it were, to the invalid, for so unnecessary a remark.

'I hope it isn't far. I'm ravenous.'

'That's why we must all go. It wouldn't be safe to leave you with the food. Would it, Derek?'

And talking, laughing, they hurried off up the road. Before they had reached the top of it, the tall man found a stick in the ditch, and began to play golf with stones. Another picked up a stone, and bowled it at him. He uttered a yell, and leaped in the air to escape it.

The old man got out laboriously, and made the boat fast to the iron ring. An acquaintance greeted him, an elderly island man, ambling down the causeway.

'Doctors,' the old man replied, to an obvious question. 'It's all doctors. London doctors. Specialists.'

'Aye,' corroborated the engineer. 'From Harley Street.'

An extraordinary thrill ran through the invalid as he heard these words. From the instant he saw them, he had been drawn towards the visitors, and had felt them to be of unusual significance. It was not only their life, their vividness, the gay colours of their shirts, and the silk scarves of the girls: it was a sense that they meant more than this. Their arrival was more than a fortunate accident. It bore a

special message to him and to his well-being. He leaned back upon his cushion against the stone, limp with an excited happiness.

Soon the party reappeared, coming down the road, the tall man still capering and leaping. If they had stopped in front of the invalid, pointed a finger, or held out a hand, and bidden him rise and leap with them, he would have been able to do so. The miracle would have been real.

But they did not. He could hardly have expected that they would. Without paying him any attention at all, they clustered round their baskets, and began eating ravenously. The darkest of the girls complained that the stone was hard and nubbly to the back. The tall man, Derek, leaped up, and, to the scandal of the few beholders, brought her a lobster pot. The girls cried out against him.

'Take it away. It smells. Look—it's got bits of rotten fish in it.'

The tall man eyed the pot. His face was half handsome, half comical: blue eyes, fair hair already thin on top, and the scalp peeping through, pink with sunburn. He attempted to look dispassionate, but his face spread into a grin. It was an infectious grin, widening as ripples widen over a pond.

'It does smell a bit,' he admitted. 'Well, well. I meant all for the best.'

He replaced it. Meanwhile the dark man with the burnt knees had solved the problem by rolling a mackintosh into a ball, and packing it against the small of the girl's back.

'Thank you, Tim. Now, you're a sensible man.'

The dark man looked absurdly pleased. The invalid, the tentacles of his intuition reaching out to the group, divined that the tall man eclipsed Tim, the dark man; that Tim felt it, and that the girl who spoke understood, and had intended to please him.

'Have another sandwich, anyway,' Tim said, reaching over the packet to the tall man.

'No, thanks. I'll try an egg one this time.'

'These *are* egg.'

'Are they? Oh, well then, I'll have one.'

They went on for a while, eating and laughing. Then the fair girl got up, and walked to the edge of the pier.

'Have you got everything you want?' she asked Hector and Andrew.

The pair started. Hector, his mouth full, could only mumble. The engineer bleared up, and replied: 'Yes, thank you. Yes. We have everything.'

'Poor Andrew,' she said, coming back to the group. 'He looks very miserable. His eyes must be hurting him still.'

'I noticed him shutting them several times, on the way over.'

'Maybe he has a headache.'

'Why doesn't he wear a hat?'

'The sun . . .'

Immediately the three girls began to look at the men. The men, with the quick defensiveness of doctors on a holiday, began to discuss the best way up the Sguir.

'I know,' said the fair girl. She kneeled up, and groped in her bag, and the invalid saw by a flash of sunlight that she wore a wedding ring. 'I'll lend him my smoked glasses. They'll lessen the glare for him.'

'Yes.' The third man rolled half over on one side. 'Try him with them.'

The girl went across, and after a minute he rose and joined her.

'What is it?' he inquired cheerfully. 'Eyes hurting you?'

'Yes, sir.' The engineer looked up, his blue eyes strained and bloodshot. 'It was the gas, sir. In the war. Blind I was, at first, quite blind, for nearly three weeks. Then it got all right. But I get it still, sometimes, when the light is very strong.'

'Wouldn't it be better if you wore a hat?'

'No, sir. I've tried, but it doesn't make any difference. It will pass off soon,' he added, not wishing to distress them.

'Try these, anyway,' the girl said, stretching down the glasses. 'I find them a great help, especially when there's a glare from the water.'

With a charming smile, Andrew took the glasses.

'Thank you very much. Thank you indeed. Thank you, miss.'

'I like being called miss,' she said, taking the man's arm,

as they walked back to the others. The invalid guessed that he was her husband.

Their meal over, the chocolate sampled and found good, they produced a map, and the three men lay at full length upon the ground, poring over it, and began to argue as to the best way to climb.

'Up the road to past that cottage—then branch off, over those foothills, then along that gully . . .'

'You can see that from here. Look.' The tall man, Derek, rolled over and pointed. 'You don't want a map for that.'

'No, but we don't know what's above . . .'

'Come on. Let's go and see.'

'Give us a chance. Let the meal settle. We needn't go yet.'

'How long will it take?'

'Oh, I don't know. About an hour each way.'

'Well, then, we needn't . . .'

'Look here, let's work the thing out properly. Eileen—when have we got to be back at the house?'

'Dinner's at quarter to eight—and *please* don't let's be late, or the cook will never speak to me again.'

'All right, all right. We're not going to be late.'

'That's what you said last time.'

The married man rolled on his back and looked up at the remote, cloudless blue.

'I hate being tied to meal-times. I can't see any sense in it. Why should we order our lives to please a woman we pay to wait on us?'

'That's all very well. You're not the one who has to pacify her.'

'It's all rot, this going in fear of servants. I maintain—'

'Well,' broke in Derek—evidently the topic had been argued before—'dinner at quarter to eight. That means we ought to be back at the house by quarter past seven. It takes us—how long from the landing place?'

'Ten minutes. Quarter of an hour.'

'Say, quarter of an hour. We must land at seven, then. That means leaving here at five. Half an hour for tea.'

'Longer. I want a bathe before we go.'

'In that case,' his grin widened, 'we must start at once. Come on, John, my lad.'

'Damn you, Derek. Why can't you leave a man in peace.'

'I'm ready,' said Tim, putting pieces of orange peel tidily into a paper-bag, and screwing it up into a ball.

'So'm I.'

The second of the two dark girls sprang up and shook out her skirt.

'Aren't you two coming?'

The husband, rising to his feet, looked down at the other two girls.

'No fear.'

'Come on. Do you good.'

'I'm here to enjoy myself, not to be done good to.'

'Lazy brutes.'

'Get on. You'll be late.'

And, with more raillery and good-natured grumbling, the mountaineers set off. The two girls, after a brief consultation, rose and carried their cushions to a grassy bank above the boat-house, to the disappointment of the invalid, who had hoped to get into conversation with them.

v

His mind was diverted by the arrival of Sandy Blake, and a general movement down the road towards the pier. Looking out to sea, he beheld the boat, soft and vague in the haze, a bare quarter of an hour away.

Sandy, a fat, bow-legged man with a walrus moustache and a large wart on his cheek, grunted with annoyance when he saw the strangers' motor boat tied up by the pier. He looked over, and spoke gutturally in Gaelic. Conciliatory replies came back in Andrew's soft voice, and he and Hector proceeded to move the boat, easing it along the stonework with their hands. When Andrew stood up, the invalid saw that the smoked glasses were gone.

As soon as the boat had moved, Sandy turned round and barked a gruff command to the three or four small boys who had come down with him. Jumping and whooping, they rushed to a small boat lying on her side upon the slip, and in

an incredibly short time had slid her into the water, and brought her round to where Sandy stood.

At the same time the intending passengers came slowly down to the pier. These were a big, square, blond young man, with a child of two on his shoulder; a young woman, evidently his wife, dressed in her best, carrying a baby, and anxiously picking her way over the uneven stones; and an elderly woman with a haversack, maybe a schoolmistress on holiday. Close behind them came an old woman, bare-headed, shading her eyes against the sun, and murmuring endearments to the child on the man's shoulder, who stared vacantly round, and paid her no attention.

'Mind yourself now, on the weed,' said the thick-set young man, turning round, as soon as the woman with the baby reached high water mark.

'Yes,' chimed in the old woman, with sudden solicitude for the baby. 'It is very slippery, the weed.'

The young woman said nothing, but continued to make her way with extreme caution, until she was standing beside the man, at the water's edge.

Meanwhile Sandy had rowed out to his motor-boat, and scrambled aboard her. He kept one of the boys, and bade the others row the boat back again. Then he bent over and began to work at the motor.

The old engine, as usual, was a while in starting, and Sandy had to grunt and swear and swing her several times before he got her going. His indignation was increased by a couple of sharp hoots from the approaching vessel, which saw that there was no boat ready to meet it. Thus he was in a bad temper by the time he came alongside, and hustled his passengers aboard without ceremony, abruptly cutting short the farewells of the old lady, who had counted on the usual orgy of leave-taking. She had not even time to kiss the baby before Sandy roughly bade her stand back, and pushed the boat off.

With trembling lips, murmuring to herself, she stood, still shading her eyes, and every now and then smiling weakly and waving her hand after the voyagers.

VI

'Crabbed people,' repeated old Hector. He raised himself on one elbow and spat into the water. 'I shall not be easy till I am in a place of my own again.'

Andrew blinked at him from aching eyes.

'Why did you leave your cottage?' he asked.

'I did not leave it at all. Put out, I was.'

'Why? Were you not paying the rent?'

'Och no. Why would I be paying rent? Sir William is a rich man. He has no need of my money.'

'That's as may be. But I expect it was because you did not pay that you were put out.'

'I was put out because the roof was leaking, and Sir William did not wish the cost of mending it.'

'But if you had paid your rent,' persisted Andrew, 'he would have been willing to mend it. It is what I am telling you, you were put out because you did not pay the rent.'

The old man sucked his pipe. 'Maybe,' he said; but obviously did not believe it.

'And you are with cross people, you say?' went on Andrew.

'Cross people, and very cross people. I will be glad when I have a place to myself again.'

'Why are they cross? They are your own people, are they not?'

'They are my own people, my brother's children, and I do not know why they are cross, except it is the way they are made, bad luck go with them.'

'But what do they do?'

Andrew evidently wanted to get the matter right.

'They do nothing,' said the old man. 'Everything is a trouble. Anything I ask, anything I do, they pull cross faces.' He spat again. 'Crabbed people. Crabbed people.'

Andrew opened his screwed-up eyes, and gave the old man a shrewd blink.

'You will not be costing them much, I suppose?'

'I am not costing them a penny,' retorted Hector indignantly. 'I have my wages, and, in the winter, when I am

not working, my parcel each week from McTavish's. How would I be costing them anything?'

'It is a queer thing they are cross to you, so.'

'It is a very queer thing,' said the old man. He sighed, as one who contemplates a mystery.

VII

The place where Sandy met the steamer was just out of sight round the arm of the headland, so that there was an interval before the returning boat revealed what passengers, if any, had come from the mainland. The invalid always resented this interval. With his powerful binoculars, he could easily have seen who was climbing down the ladder into the motor-boat, and been first with the news: though it was not for this he would have liked to see, as much as for the extra entertainment.

So still was the water that the wash of the motor-boat, spreading out like a fan with silver edges, could be seen wandering across the little bay even after the boat was out of sight. One wing of it soon reached the shore and was lost among the weedy rocks under the headland: the other the invalid watched faintly receding over the longer distance to the inland shore.

He lost it, heard voices, looked up the road, and saw his sister walking down with the old doctor. He noted with displeasure that she had changed her frock, and was wearing a gay thing with a pattern of flowers which he privately considered too young for her. But he only gave her a glance: his attention was taken up by the extraordinary spectacle offered by her companion.

The old doctor always dressed with care, as if the island were a resort of fashion, and the islanders were impressed, thinking such clothes appropriate to his distinction and his learning. He affected severe professional blacks and navy blues, would wear gloves, carried a rolled umbrella, enclosed his curiously neat small feet in patent leathers or, if the day were fine, in white shoes irreproachably pipe-clayed.

Even so, the invalid had never seen him as he was to-day. He wore a suit of smart black, set off by a white waistcoat

with large pearl buttons. Round his neck was a butterfly collar, with portentously wide wings, and a bow tie of silver with black spots. Most striking of all, incongruously perched upon his venerable head was a vast straw hat of gaudy colours, arranged in stripes running the whole way round. The invalid had never seen such a hat: he conjectured that it must come from Mexico. Its brim was so wide as to shelter not only the doctor's head but his ample shoulders.

The group of villagers by the boat-house was stricken into complete silence by the hat. They could hardly reply to the doctor's greeting and grave uplifted hand of benediction. The invalid's sister was clearly embarrassed to be in his company. She looked away, her colour heightened, and at the first chance she left the road and climbed upon a rock, pretending to be interested in some object out to sea.

The invalid, staring at the hat, wanted to laugh. The worst of it all was that the old doctor seemed completely ignorant of the figure he cut, but bore himself with the greatest dignity, looking in stately fashion to left and right, making a kind of royal progress down the road, and maintaining his state even when the rough stones of the pier obliged him to look where he was putting his feet.

He had perceived the invalid, but pretended not to see him till he was close in front of him. He felt it incumbent to discover his patient, and feign surprise. To acknowledge his presence too soon, as if he expected it, might seem to suggest approval.

Allowing himself to notice at last, he raised a stately hand in greeting.

'Ah, Mr. Morison. You here, too. Taking advantage of this wonderful sunshine?'

'Yes, doctor.'

'You have your head and neck well protected, I see.' His gaze rested benignly on the sunshade. 'A wise precaution.'

'Yes, doctor.' The invalid looked again at the hat, twisted his lip, and looked away. 'What brings you down, doctor?' he asked, with a faint malice, for the visit was unwonted. 'Come to watch the boat arrive?'

The old man stiffened.

'I was informed,' he said severely, 'that some distinguished

medical men were visiting the island, and have come down to pay my respects. I don't see them anywhere,' he added, looking round.

The invalid pointed.

'They're up there,' he said. 'They've gone to climb the Sguir.'

The old doctor revolved slowly, and looked up at the Sguir as if he had never seen it before.

'To climb the Sguir,' he repeated disapprovingly. 'In such weather as this?'

'They said so.'

'H'm.' The doctor paused. 'When will they return?' he inquired.

'About tea time.'

'About tea time. Well. It's very vexing. I suppose I shall have to come down again.'

'If you want to see them. Those ladies belong to them. No: not those. Those up there; on the grass.'

'H'm.' The doctor coughed, as if he found the subject indelicate. 'I'll—I'll come down again.'

His manner suggested that the invalid was in some way responsible for the visitors' defection, but that as a concession, he would make a second appearance. He stood for a moment majestically caressing his chin, and his benignity returned.

'Yes,' he said. 'Yes. That will be best. I'll come down again.'

And, with a soothing smile, he turned round, and receded slowly up the causeway. When he drew level with the invalid's sister, he looked at her, perhaps hoping for her company on the way back: but she sat hugging her knees, and looked steadfastly out to sea.

VIII

Levering himself carefully on one elbow, the invalid-changed his position. His leg was sweating where it pressed against the cushion. That was the worst of those very soft cushions. They were apt to be hot.

He glanced up the road again. The doctor had passed the boat-house, and the girls on the grassy knoll were covertly

enjoying the sight of him. The invalid would have liked to catch their eye and exchange smiles, but they were too far away. His sister screwed her head round, and looked back over one shoulder at the broad stately back, crowned by the preposterous headgear, till it disappeared round the bend in the road. She looked at the invalid, and the two exchanged a grimace. He hoped that she would stay where she was. To his relief, she showed no sign of wanting to move.

Then a chugging sound filled the small still bay, and Sandy Blake's boat reappeared round the corner of the headland. Picking up his glasses, the invalid trained them on it. He could not see clearly at first, for the passengers were huddled together. Then he made out the square young man—evidently he had merely gone to see his wife and children safe on board; an unknown young man, sitting beside a couple of suit-cases, whom he set down as a commercial traveller; a good-looking girl, who might be a domestic servant come home for her holidays; and an elderly couple, of the farming class, with a boy of twelve or fourteen.

By the time Morison had satisfied himself upon these particulars, the boat was close in. A few of the villagers detached themselves from the small crowd at the boat-house, and came down to meet it, followed by the island postman with his barrow.

The postman wore, as always on these occasions, a sulky, anxious expression. His mind would not be at rest till he had seen how many parcels were in the mail. Lazy, and of plethoric build, he did not look forward in this heat to transporting a heavy weight upon the front of his old red bicycle. He was entirely shameless about this, and, if there were more parcels than he liked, he would leave some behind, to wait for the next delivery. The islanders hardly dared to express resentment at the delay, since the postman was in a position to victimize those who earned his dislike, by leaving their parcels behind. Instead, they endeavoured to secure his favour with gifts of food and drink, so that his round became a very leisurely affair, and the remoter houses did not get their mail till eight or nine in the evening.

The boat approached the slip. Several of the women

began calling out to the girl on board. She waved energetically and called out in reply. Another minute, and Sandy, with a bad grace, was making his usual pretence of handing his passengers ashore.

The girl hesitated, making way for the elderly woman, who brusquely waved her on. Without availing herself of Sandy's proffered hand, she sprang lightly out, and waited for her suit-case and hat-box. They were new and smart, but not expensive. In a moment the women clustered round her, uttering glad exclamations. Flushed, but collected and cool, she kissed them all in turn. They clasped her tight, then stood away, admiring her smart town coat and skirt.

'My, my,' they exclaimed in chorus. 'You're awful grand.'

'Make way there,' Sandy interrupted them. 'Make way there, please'; and with fresh exclamations they drew back, realizing that in their excitement they had all been standing so as to prevent any one else's leaving the boat.

The square young man, beaming good-naturedly, got out next; then the commercial traveller, grasping his suit-cases one in each hand, looking scared and self-conscious. He slipped as he stepped on the weedy stones, and a bystander put out a friendly hand to steady him. Thanking his benefactor, with increased self-consciousness the traveller made his way up the pier, his thin cheeks reddening as he imagined that every one must be looking at him.

Last came the elderly couple and the boy. They had a great deal of gear. It consisted of large and shapeless parcels, and a dropsical old hold-all, bravely bestrapped, with a rug round its middle.

The woman immediately claimed the invalid's attention. She surprisingly combined a small head and sharp, bird-like features with a strong and solid body. Her legs were short and thick, her hips of enormous breadth. She was, moreover, in an agitated and difficult frame of mind, and caused trouble by obstinately clinging to one of the largest parcels, and refusing to let it go even when her husband and Sandy pointed out that she would infallibly slip if she tried to disembark with it in her arms.

In the end Sandy impatiently grasped her and it together,

and somehow hustled her ashore. She slipped, but did not fall, and, hugging the bundle, deposited it on the stones at the top in grim triumph. The other bundles followed, and presently the trio were standing surrounded by their goods, looking like the victims of an earthquake.

Darting her severe, bird-like glances about, the woman called out in a high loud voice:

‘Where’s the cart? Alexander—do you see the cart?’

‘It’s not here,’ answered the man placidly.

‘How do you know it’s not here? It may be up there behind the boat-house. Go up and see.’

‘It’s not here. I told Geordie to bring it down to the side, because we would have heavy bundles. He said he would bring it.’

‘If he said he would bring it, why is he not here?’

The man wriggled. Evidently he had little taste for speculation.

‘Maybe he was not able to come so soon. They might be cutting the hay.’

‘There,’ the woman cried bitterly, to any one who cared to listen. ‘There. So we will have to walk, in all this heat, and carry our things with us.’

‘No, we need not carry them. I will put them above in the boat-house.’

‘Thank you, Alexander Macdonald. Thank you indeed! I will not leave my things here, by the roadside, for any one to pick up.’

‘Now, now. They will be all right.’

‘They will not be all right. And you, you feckless man, why could you not make a proper arrangement that we should be met, instead of trusting all to that good-for-nothing Geordie!’

She stormed on, until an exclamation from the boy made both turn their heads. An oafish-looking creature, overgrown, with large hands and feet, and hair that needed cutting, he had edged off during the quarrel, and suddenly caught sight of Hector and Andrew in the visitors’ motor-boat. Immediately his face broke into a smile of real charm.

‘Mother! Dad!’ he called. ‘Will you see who is here. If it isn’t Andrew!’

Thankfully seizing on the diversion, the man trotted across.

'Andrew! Why, so it is. Andrew, my boy, how are you! It's a long time since we saw you last.'

Evidently Andrew, whatever his relationship to the trio, was a favourite, for even the woman's grim face relaxed into a smile as she bent over to shake his hand. An animated conversation followed, all speaking at once, and it soon became plain that the husband was forgiven for the non-appearance of the cart, his well-known weakness and want of system in such matters forming the subject of much laughter, in which even the boy joined.

'You don't look well, Andrew,' said the man suddenly, bending forward, his hands on his knees, and peering into Andrew's face. 'Is it your eyes are hurting you?'

'Ah, yes': and Andrew explained about them once more.

'You should wear a hat,' pronounced the man. 'Should he not, Morag? A straw hat, with a wide brim. A floppy hat. A Panama hat.'

'I tried a hat, but, sure, it makes no difference.'

'Then you should wear an eyeshade. Or smoked glasses. And bathe your eyes twice a day.'

'I have an eyeshade,' smiled Andrew, producing it. 'And a lady here has lent me a pair of smoked glasses. And I have a prescription the doctor gave me for my eyes.'

'And still they hurt you?'

'And still they hurt me.'

'Oh, well then, in that case,' said the man, straightening up, 'there is nothing more I can do for you, Andrew. Nothing more at all.'

A few more words were exchanged, and then the trio concerned themselves once more with their parcels. With surprising strength, the man hoisted upon his back the largest bundle, and made his way, bent double, along the causeway. The woman cried a protest.

'I'll drop it above in the boat-house,' he said, adding with a grin, 'it'll be safe. No one will take it away.'

The woman turned to the boy.

'Watch your dad,' she commanded shrilly. 'What are

you at, staring there? Watch your dad, to see he doesn't stumble.'

'I'm all right,' said the voice from under the bundle: but the boy ran forward remorsefully, and took his elbow, steering him carefully until he reached the comparative level of the road.

'Are you all right, dad?'

'Aye, son. I am all right.'

With a smile at his mother—he seemed in no way daunted by her ferocity of manner—the boy came back, and proceeded to grapple an enormous load. The woman, preoccupied with her own load, did not see him until he had staggered several yards.

'Johnnie!' she cried. 'Put down that hold-all. It's too heavy for you.'

'I'm all right, mother.'

'Put it down this minute, I say.'

And, burdened as she was, she ran after him, shifted her load so as to gain a free hand, and pulled the hold-all from his grasp.

The invalid watched them as they went up the road, she scolding him with a kind of fierce affection, he replying with affectionate protests. The man stood outside the boat-house, where he had dumped his parcel, too much blown to offer help. Arrived, they proceeded to have a long argument, presumably about the disposition of their goods: whether to leave them, and trust to the defaulting Geordie, or take them along. In the end a compromise was made, but it necessitated unpacking some of the bundles, in order to extract the most valuable or necessary objects.

IX

Morison watched, smiling, when an outburst of wild whoops made him turn his head. Sandy's retinue of small boys, screaming with laughter, scrapping like puppies, had left the boat and were running up the slip. They passed him in the wildest excitement, their bare feet pattering on the stones, and rushed up to the boat-house.

One of them, catching sight of a colleague, paused outside

the door, and called shrilly, making the old woman jump in the midst of her unpacking. She turned, apparently to remonstrate with him, but he and his friends were in no mood to consider the susceptibilities of the elderly. A few seconds afterwards they burst out of the boat-house with a concerted yell which brought her round sharper than ever. She called something after their retreating backs, and went on with her unpacking.

There were now five boys. Two of them were carrying a kind of barrow without wheels, like a stretcher, only shorter: and the others were running by their side. As they reached the uneven stones, the boy at the back put down his head and charged with all his weight, pushing the boy in front irresistibly forward. He, poor wretch, needing to go slow and watch his step on the rough stones, leaned back, trying to dig in his heels, and yelled in shrill dismay: but the other was merciless, and he had to go on, trusting to luck and planting his feet where best he might. When, panting and laughing, the troupe pulled up beside Sandy, the victim turned to remonstrate. Then, finding himself unhurt, he grinned, and lunged at his tormentor's stomach.

'Less of that,' commanded Sandy. 'Come on, now. Hoist her up.'

On the slip lay a number of small bags of cement. With an effort, the boys placed one of them on the hurdle. The same two were for trying to carry it, but Sandy was adamant, and in the end four started up the slip, each holding a handle. Positions were now reversed; the boy who had been pushed over the stones was at the back, with another, and the boy who had pushed him held one of the front handles. The former victim whispered to his partner, and the two, putting their heads down, charged forward. Yelling with mingled terror and delight, the leaders were forced to run, until, reaching an especially rough place, they shied, and swerved simultaneously to one side. The hurdle pivoted and swung round, all but over-setting the two at the back, and all four halted, helpless, breathless with laughter.

The invalid, who was rather shy of them, had to smile too. They acknowledged his smile, or at least they did not reject it. Then, spurred on by a bellow from Sandy, they

were off again. Seven times they repeated the journey, till all the bags were in the boat-house.

The invalid marvelled at their energy, beneath the full blaze of the sun. They were a small lot, under-sized, but brown, clean-limbed, and wiry. They wore precisely the same clothes in all weathers—a shirt and jersey, and a pair of ragged shorts. Differing in feature and colouring, they were yet strangely alike. One, dark, freckled, with light mischievous eyes and a musical voice, stood out as the strongest personality. The others were almost indistinguishable.

When the boys' journeyings at last were finished, Morison again adjusted his cushions, and leant back with a sigh. Such energy made him feel vicariously exhausted. He wished he could get to know the boys. From time to time he had made shy overtures to them, but the overtures were too shy. He lacked the necessary confidence. The boys perceived his shyness, and were infected by it. Besides, they were self-sufficient. It was he who needed company, not they. He began to wonder how he might attract their attention. Was there anything he might bring down? He might take their photographs, perhaps, and give them the prints afterwards? That would mean sending to the mainland for films; and at the thought of any exertion, his spirit went limp. He could not face effort, in these days.

Now that Sandy's manœuvres were over, the visitors' motor-boat moved back to its former position, and Andrew, with a word to the old man, got out, and went off up the road towards the village. The tide had risen: the stern of the boat was now visible over the slope of the concrete. The old man, left in sole charge, scrambled slowly into the stern seats and composed himself for sleep.

Impassively, with an instant abandonment which was eloquent of his life and the standards of comfort to which he was accustomed, he lay back, his head on a wooden locker, his lean, angular body propped against it, closed his eyes, and slept. It made the invalid ache in every bone to look at him, so cramped was his posture, so sharp and uncompromisingly hard the edges against which he leaned. Even the old man found them a little unyielding, for he shifted once or twice, and muttered in his beard, before he

at last found the perfect position, and sank into a strong immobility.

The invalid shifted again, and sighed. The surface of the sea was bright as glass. A fish leaped. It was dark green and silver. He could distinctly see its eye, and the quick wriggling of its tail, before it hit the water again. The ripple started out glassily in rings, but the widening circles seemed soon to faint, and sink exhausted into the smooth, bright stillness.

X

Suddenly Morison had remembered the climbers, and lifted his eyes to the Sguir. Yes! Already! There, on the top, the rounded crest above the sheer overhanging cliff, infinitesimal figures stood against the sky.

Trembling with excitement, the invalid seized his glasses, raised them, nervously adjusted the focus, and looked. Yes: there they were. The powerful lenses leaped across the space, halting at a point perhaps half a mile away, hovering in the air above the valley.

He could distinguish the climbers by what they were wearing. That was the tall one, with his white shirt and long grey flannel trousers. He stood, then moved to one side. What was happening? They were huddling together. Then the dark one appeared. He was standing in front of them. Funny, far-off midgets! The distance gave an illusion of incredible, bug-like slowness to their movements. Why should they arrange themselves like that? And, as he asked the question, the invalid answered it. The dark one—Tim—must be taking a photo.

The invalid's wrists began to ache: the glasses shook so that he could watch no longer. With a curse at their weight, he put them down, and looked up the road towards the girls. They were still together upon the knoll. The face of one was turned towards him. In his excitement, he waved, attracted her attention, and pointed upward. She turned, shading her eyes, and evidently caught sight of the tiny figures. Waiting till she again looked his way, Morison held up the glasses. She hesitated for an instant, spoke to the other girl, and the two came slowly down the road together.

'There.' Morison's heart was beating so violently that he could barely speak. 'I don't know if the focus is right for you. You must alter it, if it isn't.'

'Yes. You screw it round.'

They stood over him, the two lovely elegant creatures, looking through the glasses, laughing, exclaiming, filling his soul with wonder and delight. He could hardly believe that this was happening.

'Look at that ass Derek. He's playing the fool still.'

'How can I look, when you've got the glasses?'

They were a little self-conscious, for the obvious excitement of the invalid had communicated itself to them. They would have liked, as soon as was decently possible, to hand him back the glasses, but their quick sympathies went out to him, and they began to praise the glasses, turning them here and there, looking first inland, and then across the water to the shadowy mountains.

'A pity it's so hazy. You must get a splendid view of the mainland, and all the boats passing.'

'Yes. Yes.'

The invalid poured out an eager torrent of description. Because he was so vividly interested, and valued so dearly all that extended the narrow horizons of his world, there was power in what he said. The girls, who had at first meant to go away, stayed to talk to him.

'You can't sit there,' he protested. 'It's too hard.'

'Only for a minute,' smiled the darker one of the girls. His face fell, and she amended quickly: 'I'll go and fetch the cushions. They'll soon be back for tea.'

'Yes, and we have to butter and jam the scones.' She turned to Morison. 'How long will they take to get back, do you think?'

The assumption that he must know flattered him immensely.

'About half as long as they took to go up. Say, forty minutes. They haven't started yet,' he added: and immediately wished he had not, lest it should make the time seem too long, and the girls should decide to go away. He began to cast about desperately in his mind for some topic of interest to detain them. They went off to get the cushions,

and he watched, fearful lest they had taken a dislike to him and would not come back; but they came back.

What they talked about, Morison had afterwards no clear memory. His senses were in a maze. They seemed to be sub-divided, noting several things at once; preternaturally acute in detail, but incapable of concentration; retaining no general idea of the whole scene but a fervent wish that it be prolonged as much as possible.

Thus he noted presently, with regret, that the top of the Sguir was bare of midgets, for it meant that a period had already been set to his hour of bliss. He saw, out of the corner of his eye, his sister rise from her rock, and hesitate, looking at the group. Now, he thought, in a spurt of sudden malice, now she'll be jealous; and at once he noted and deplored his malice, seeing spread out like a map his sister's many acts of goodness towards him, together with certain of her physical peculiarities which irritated and repelled him, and wondered how it was that affection and repulsion could so certainly exist side by side.

He took note again of the glassy stillness of the little bay, and the leap of another fish, farther out, which sent rings spreading like a drowsy flower opening upon the waters. Then he realized, from a pause, and the clear grey eyes of one of the girls fixed upon his own, that she had asked him a question. Part of his attention must have heard it, for, although he answered with the panic-stricken haste of a schoolboy who has been dreaming and finds the master's gaze upon him, the girl seemed satisfied.

Thus ideas darted in and out of his mind, like the tiny fish he could see playing hide and seek around a clump of still weed that soared in the rising tide below him, and he was wrought to such a pitch of perception that it was almost a relief when the girls rose, saying that, if he would forgive them, they would like to stretch their legs and go a little way to meet the climbers.

XI

Prone though he was to interpret everything to his own disadvantage, Morison could not think that he had driven

them away. The peaceful beauty of the afternoon, the charmed floating air, the earth so radiant that it seemed to send back light and warmth to the sun; the greenness of the fields, the smooth gleaming pull of the summer tide at the stones; all breathed together in a dream which made his spirit almost swoon with happiness. Nothing could go wrong in such an hour. Even though words failed, though question and answer were at cross purposes, the direct speech of happiness must pass from soul to soul.

He was so happy that for a while he was glad to be alone, to lie back and contemplate what had happened and what still was happening, to feel little bubbles of joy rising within him, till he wanted to get up and leap and sing. But he could not: or could he? Anyway, he did not dare, but had to content himself with snapping his fingers and smiling idiotically, till he laughed aloud to think how foolish he must look, and how grossly a gesture could caricature the emotion that provoked it.

Looking around, he saw that the ring to which the visitors' boat was tethered had been forgotten, and was now a good two feet under the risen tide. He debated with himself whether to call the old man's attention to it, then decided that he must. His new friends might well look askance at him, if he sat there all the time, and never noticed.

He looked at the boat. It had risen a clear foot. The old man, like a graven image, lay asleep. With new-found daring, Morison cleared his throat.

'Hi,' he called, timidly: and then, much louder: 'Hi! In the boat!'

The old man opened an eye and regarded him, without expression.

'The ring. The tide.' Morison pointed. 'Where the boat is fastened. Under water.'

The old man looked for a moment, uncomprehending. Then he started, as if a pin had been stuck into him.

'Och,' he exclaimed, and swore in Gaelic. To Morison's surprise, a heavenly smile appeared upon his face, and he clambered out.

'How will you get it?'

'I put off my boots.'

He sat down, and proceeded to do so. Morison watched apprehensively, but to his astonishment the old man's feet were clean and white as a woman's. They contrasted amazingly with his brown gorilla-hands and leather-like, tanned face. Rolling up his trousers over thin, blue-veined legs, he stepped delicately into the water, groped, untied the knot, and carried the end of the rope up to a higher ring, where he made it fast. He glanced up the road as he did so. Morison read the glance, and he and the old man exchanged grins of complicity. It was all he could do to refrain from chuckling aloud.

Slowly and deliberately, without waiting to dry his feet, the old man put on his stockings and boots. A movement to Morison's left caught his eye, and he saw his sister coming down the road. She was bringing him his tea. But why in that bigger basket? He knew, and a sudden pettish anger rushed across his mind, darkening everything.

When she came up to him, he could not bring himself to speak to her.

'I brought my own tea down too,' she said brightly. 'It's such a lovely afternoon.'

Yes, he said to himself; so that you can butt in where nobody wants you, and spoil my pleasure.

He looked at her sideways, the spittle turning sour in his mouth. She had changed her clothes, and got herself up as best she knew how. With a shock of unwilling surprise, he realized that she looked rather nice. As he looked, she caught and held his eye.

'I can go away, and leave you, if you'd rather,' she said.

At once his heart turned over. The simple candour of her glance, the understanding of him which it revealed, sent a flood of shame over him. Sudden and unreasonable as his anger, he felt a revival of all the old affection which illness and proximity had hidden. His eyes filled with tears, and he smiled.

'Of course I'd like you to stay,' he said.

Moved in her turn, she coloured and looked away. For a moment there was silence between them.

'Here they are,' he said quietly: and, looking up the road, they saw the gay party returning.

XII

A short way off, the two girls who had stayed behind halted, in consternation.

'Good lord! We never buttered the scones!'

'Plenty of time!' observed Derek. 'We're ten minutes to the good.'

'I say, John, I'm so sorry. We meant to: then, somehow, we got talking, and forgot.'

'All right! it doesn't take as long as all that.'

Morison felt the blood rise to his cheeks. He was in part to blame for this. He looked away from the group. When he recovered his composure, and looked back, they were all busy, the tall man squatting on his hunkers, gravely putting jam on the scones with a teaspoon. Though two shades pinker than when they had started, he seemed perfectly fresh, and able to have gone twice the distance. The other two and the girl lay back against the wall, frankly thankful to sit down.

'What was it like?' asked one of the girls, without looking up from her work.

'Fine,' said the husband briefly.

'Tim fell in a bog,' grinned the tall man, looking round.

'Who got stuck in a rock chimney, and had to go back?'

'My manly limbs are not made for the rock chimneys in this district.'

'Well. Mine aren't made for the bogs.'

'Aren't they? I should have said they were. Same mottled appearance: same general hairiness.'

Tim looked about for something to throw, but gave it up, and lay back exhausted.

'Here,' said the tall man, rising carefully to his feet, and balancing a cardboard plate perilously overloaded with jammed scones. 'Put one of these behind your face, and shut up.'

'Your choice of language,' observed Tim, taking a scone, 'is coarse: but, in consideration of the gifts you bring, I will overlook it.'

'Good.'

When every one was served, Morison saw one of the girls jerk her head in the direction of him and his sister.

'What about . . . ?' she said, under her breath.

Flushed, stammering, the two declined.

'Thanks so much. But we have our own.'

'Really?' The tall man smiled down. His eyes, in the clear light, were amazingly blue. 'What about a swop? One of these for one of those? I like the look of those.'

And, before they realized how it had happened, introductions were made, the names muffled with full mouths, and the two tea-parties had merged into one.

'Yes. We've been here three months,' Morison heard his sister explaining, while he himself was talking animatedly to one of the girls. 'It's done him a lot of good already.'

He half turned, caught a male eye fixed on him in diagnostic appraisal, and with an effort resumed what he was saying.

The climbers had vast appetites. They did not talk much until a quarter of an hour's solid eating and drinking had eased their hunger. The scones gave out under the assault, and Morison and his sister were delighted at the chance to supplement them with their own. Fortunately, his sister had brought a lot with her, perhaps secretly hoping for some such occurrence. In return, they were constrained to accept slices of cake and bannock. The invalid, in his bewildered happiness, ate a record meal.

'Well!' The young husband, recovered, stood up, and stretched himself. 'What about a bathe?'

'After all that tea? You'll sink like a stone.'

'Shall I? You just see. Who's coming with me?'

'Not me.'

'Too full.'

'Too lazy, you mean.'

'I would,' said the tall man, 'only I've nothing to wear.'

'I'll lend you mine,' said the fair girl. 'Yes. Really. I mean it.'

'I should split it.'

'Not you,' said her husband.

Derek stood, his long legs wide apart, his eyes screwed up, grinning down at her.

'Hark at the man,' said Tim. 'He wants to get out of it.'

'No, I don't.'

'Go on, then.'

'After all, you needn't put it all on.'

'What do you mean—needn't put it all on? Is it a two-piece suit?'

'No. But you needn't put on the top part.'

'She means, shove it round your middle, ass, and don't bother to put it over your shoulders.'

'Oh, but——' he cocked an eye at the invalid and his sister. 'Is that quite nice?'

'Come on, you fool,' said the husband. 'We shan't have time.'

'May I, really?'

'Of course. It's in the basket, there. No—the red one.'

The two men retired behind a large rock, and in an inconceivably short space of time reappeared, the tall man, with his truncated garment, looking absurdly young. One after another, they dived from the pier.

Their entry to the water was hidden from the party, who heard the splashes, and presently saw them swimming out into the harbour. Their shouts of pleasure echoed across the still lagoon, filling its silence with life, adding a last touch of joy to its radiance and beauty. A dog on the far side, half a mile away, began to bark wildly in answer.

The tall man, who was an accomplished and powerful swimmer, struck out for a little flotilla of gulls lying upon the shining surface. They paid no heed till he came quite close, then lazily rose, flew fifty yards farther, and settled again. Turning on his back, he began to kick. There was a perceptible interval between his first kick and the splash.

The husband came in, dripping, beaming.

'Good,' he gasped. Standing up, he put his hands to his mouth, and called to his colleague.

'Oy!' he shouted.

The pink head turned, a hand waved, and with lazy, easy strokes the swimmer headed for the shore.

XIII

It was over. Already they were packing the baskets. Hector and Andrew woke to life, and began to stir themselves in the boat. They were handing the baskets down. The fair girl went to the rocks, and threw out some crumbs and remnants for the gulls. It was over. They were going. The invalid tried as if by an effort of the will to hold on to the minutes, to detain them. Another minute, and they would be saying good-bye.

'I say, that was good.'

The head of the tall man appeared over his rock, his hair standing up like a ring of dried furze.

'Hurry up.'

'What—are you all waiting for me?'

'Who else do you think we're waiting for?'

'Don't scold me. I'm much too happy to be scolded.'

'All right. But buck up.'

'Shan't be a minute.'

With a comical grimace, he disappeared.

'Well—good-bye.' They were taking leave of the invalid and his sister. 'Thanks so much for the scones.'

'Not at all. Thank you for the cake.'

'Good-bye. Good-bye. I hope you'll soon be quite all right again.'

'Good-bye.'

'Good-bye.'

'Here—don't go without me!'

The tall man appeared, running, waving his towel and the girl's bathing dress in the air. 'Good-bye,' he added, turning and grinning at Morison and his sister: and sprang aboard, once more rocking the boat.

'Och och.'

'Good lord, man!'

'Sit down, quick, before you do any more harm.'

The motor started chugging, a blue irregular cloud puffed from the exhaust, the water over the little propeller suddenly became agitated, and they were off. Wistfully the pair on shore watched her gather speed, saw the stretch of water

between them widen—so calm was the water, it looked as if the boat were climbing up a tilted mirror: they saw the stern dwindle and collapse in upon itself, the coloured figures shrink and become harder to distinguish.

Morison took his glasses, and brought the party close again. They laughed, their lips moved, but no sound came. There was the tall man, irrespressible, standing up again: there was Tim, gravely busy with his camera: and there was the married girl, leaning forward, being helped into a mackintosh. There was Hector, pointing, obviously bidding them rearrange themselves, so as to trim the boat. The invalid watched, jealously clinging to the last sight of them. His arms began to ache, the cherished image bobbed unsteadily up and down, and, lowering the glasses, he saw the boat a milky speck in the distance.

His sister had moved away, in pursuit of some private thought. Morison's emotions were in a strange confusion. Everything he saw told him that life had left the island, that the chance of a miracle was speeding farther and farther away from him across the shining water. Yet, instead of sorrow and sense of loss, he felt an obstinate happiness, a rising joy. The harbour too refused to acknowledge loss. The alien gaiety was gone, but in its place the life of the island tranquilly rose, with the tide, to fullness. A line of cows, no bigger than beetles, wound across a meadow on the far side of the bay, each made vivid by its shadow. Higher up on the hillside a flock of soft white specks hurried, pursued by a brown speck, sending out a clear sound of bleating into the still air. The sun, wheeling towards the Sguir, had begun to slant, and was already flinging down the mountain slope its own sheer shadow. The light was thick, near-golden. Soon the midges would be dancing. Before that, it would do well to go, so that there should be no anti-climax to the day.

XIV

Stiffly, his heart full of thankfulness and peace, the invalid rose. With a smile, his sister came across to help him. They gathered the things in silence, she taking all but the lightest. They stood, and smiled at one another.

‘Ready?’

Slowly, they began to make their way up the pier. Stiff though he was from long sitting, it seemed to the invalid that his limbs moved with a new ease. I am better, he said to himself, with an inward leap of exultation: I am better, I am really, really better. He had to look down at the ground, over the low wall, anywhere, in order to hide the ridiculous smiles that chased one another across his features.

Suddenly his sister stopped, and caught her breath.

‘Look,’ she whispered.

He looked, and saw the old doctor, in the same magnificent array, advancing down the road towards them. The two glanced at one another, then, seized with a frantic desire to giggle, looked away.

‘Ah!’ The uplifted hand blessed them. ‘You are returning home?’

‘Yes, doctor.’

‘It’s been a lovely afternoon, hasn’t it?’ added the invalid’s sister.

The doctor, however, was looking vaguely about him.

‘The—ah—visitors? The doctors? Have they returned yet from their climbing expedition?’

‘Oh, yes, doctor. They came back a long time ago.’

‘Then—where are they? I don’t see any sign of them.’

‘They’ve gone.’

‘Gone?’

‘Yes, doctor. There—that’s their boat. That little speck out there.’

‘They—but——’ The doctor’s face turned a deeper shade of red. ‘But,’ he exclaimed, ‘I was coming down especially to pay my respects. I——’ He broke off. ‘You told me,’ he said severely, ‘you distinctly told me they would return for tea.’

‘So they did.’ Morison struggled hard not to feel a malicious pleasure. ‘They came back for tea at half-past four.’

The doctor looked at him in unbelieving astonishment.

‘I,’ he said, ‘take tea at five.’

‘That’s how you missed them,’ said Morison. ‘I’m so sorry. But it can’t be helped, can it?’

And, as the doctor made no reply, he said 'Good night, doctor,' and went on his way, leaving the old man alternately staring after him, out to sea, and after him again.

Reaching the bend in the road, the two had to step aside into the ditch, to let a huge farm cart lumber past. The dust it raised hung soft and golden in the air. Looking after it, they saw it pull up at the boat-house.

'That's the cart for those people's things,' he said.

'What people?'

'The old couple and the boy. They left their parcels at the boat-house. Didn't you see them?'

'Oh yes, I believe I did.'

Changing his stick to his other hand, Morison took his sister's arm and pressed it affectionately. He knew, with deep conviction, that the day had been a turning point. He was better. His real recovery had begun. Soon his illness, and all it had brought, would be a dream.


He shut his eyes, and leaned back his head. Still warm and rich, the sunlight fell upon it. He could feel the warmth upon his whole face, and his unaccustomed eyelids. He drew a deep breath of happiness, and again pressed his sister's arm.

'I'm better,' he said.

She smiled.

'You look better.'

For a minute more they stood, gazing down at the little harbour, and out across the shining width of the sea. Then, slowly, they went up the road together.



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